**Vice or coping Mechanism? Bridging Political Science
and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Corruption**

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Introduction

Political science and economics have dominated the study of corruption. Recently, anthropologists have questioned traditional definitions of corruption, and have conducted a deeper inquiry into the interplay of cultural dynamics and corruption. In particular, Olivier de Sardan's "moral economy" (1999: 25) approach has been influential in explaining how value systems and cultural codes permit the justification of corruption by those who participate in it, thus anchoring corruption in everyday practice. He argues that in Africa, cultural 'facilitators' exist which help to "dissolve the borderline between sociocultural logics and corrupt daily practices" (Olivier de Sardan, 1999: 47). The divide between public and private domains, which lies at the centre of many economic and political perspectives on corruption, is hence blurred.

Despite the existence of two strands in anthropology—interpretive and political-economy (Marcus & Fischer, 1986)—anthropological contributions to the study of corruption have come primarily from interpretive anthropology. Anthropologists studying corruption have focused on narratives and on understanding corruption's embeddedness in cultural logics. Ethnography, however, has revealed the importance of fixed price in many instances of corruption. This paper argues that fixed price is an indicator of the systematisation of corruption. Consequently, greater attention needs to be paid to how corruption is also embedded in political economy.

This paper firstly considers different approaches to corruption that have been taken by academics in the political science tradition, and offers critiques from interpretive

anthropology. It then considers, at a more general level, the notion of moral economy, subsequently focusing on Olivier de Sardan's moral economy of corruption. Finally, on the basis of ethnographic examples, it argues for a need to add the political-economy perspective into the cultural analysis of corruption. While navigating between interpretive anthropology and political economy may be akin to steering between Scylla and Charybdis, the paper argues that this is a worthy pursuit, which can improve our understanding of corruption.

Political Science Perspectives on Corruption and Anthropological Critiques

Defining Corruption

Political science scholars have endeavoured to develop comparative analytical frameworks for analysing the relationship between political systems and corruption. Consequently, defining corruption has been of fundamental importance, and one of anthropology's strongest critiques of political science approaches to corruption centres on questions of definition. It is hence fruitful to consider some of these definitions.

Firstly, corruption can be defined as behaviour that deviates from the public interest (Lancaster and Montinola, 1997). Since public interest is itself hard to define, a second set of definitions focuses on behaviour that deviates from legal norms. Included in this set is Nye's famous definition, which states that, "[c]orruption is behaviour which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains" (1967: 419). Nye's definition has been criticised as too narrow, giving rise to a definition of corruption as deviation from moral standards widely held by the public.

All three of these definitions have been critiqued for being ethnocentric, since they assume a common set of moral and/or legal standards. Consequently, a fourth definition,

which tries to avoid condemning non-Western practices, places corruption under the framework of 'patrimonialism', which Lancester and Montinola define as a "form of domination with an administrative apparatus whose members are recruited from personal dependents of the rulers," and where, "all property… belong[s] to the ruler" (1997: 189-90). More economically inclined political scientists focus on instances of officials treating public offices as private businesses. This definition, however, applies only to bureaucrats, and not to elected government officials.

Finally, Rose-Ackerman, a prominent author on corruption, defines corruption as the "perversion of agency relationships that constitute corruption" (Lancester & Montinola, 1997: 190). She argues that scholars need to focus on the tension "between self-seeking behaviour and public values" (Rose-Ackerman, 1999: xi), writing that all states control the distribution of benefits and costs. This distribution is generally under the control of public officials, who hold discretionary powers.

> Payments are corrupt if they are illegally made to public agents with the goal of obtaining a benefit or avoiding a cost. Corruption is a symptom that something has gone wrong in the management of the state. Institutions designed to govern interrelationships between the citizen and the state are used instead for personal enrichment and the provision of benefits to the corrupt (Rose-Ackerman, 1999: 9).

She argues that self-interest motivates individuals, and endemic corruption is a sign that the state has been unable to tap that self-interest for productive purposes.

Rose-Ackerman (1999) sees corruption as working against the development of developing nations. She points to cross-country studies indicating that corruption has a negative impact on growth and productivity. In contrast, Bayley (1966) argues that corruption may actually be beneficial. He posits that corruption is an accommodating device, which allows individuals to respond to circumstances, and may hence play a positive role in development. Rose-Ackerman's counter argument is that though some bribes, for example,

may increase efficiency (e.g. by cutting red tape in a business transaction), many bribes do not have this result. In her eyes, bribes undermine government legitimacy.

The above discussion resembles an early debate between moralists and revisionists regarding the impact of corruption on development (Nye, 1967). While moralists tend to view corruption as evil and retrogressive, revisionists see it as playing a positive role in Western development, and argue that its benefits should not be overlooked. Nye wants to transcend this debate by considering the benefits and costs of corruption to the political development of a country, and argues for a consideration of the relationship between corruption and governmental capacity. He, too, concludes that, except in select circumstances, the costs of corruption will likely outweigh its benefits.

Corruption and Culture

Political science perspectives on corruption have been criticized as being largely ethnocentric. Even in instances where political science has tried to account for cultural diversity, its formulations have favoured Western perspectives. Nye (1967), for example, recognizes the lack of attention to cultural differences in his definition. However, he argues that there are two standards even in developing countries, one more indigenous, and the other Western, and claims that the latter is used most in public roles.

Nye's position assumes a rather strict public/private dichotomy. Rose-Ackerman (1999) highlights that this distinction may not necessarily exist in all societies, or may be blurred. Hence, neoclassical economics, with its assumption that the identity of buyers and sellers is irrelevant, does not hold when one would rather do business with one's cousin than a stranger. Although Rose-Ackerman acknowledges the problem of retaining strict public/private dichotomies, she retains an ethnocentric perspective. For example, she contends that personalised ties are not always compatible with efficiency, and forms of trust,

reputation and reciprocal obligation facilitate corruption, thus undermining efforts to improve state operations. Rose-Ackerman writes, "societies differ in the way they channel self-interest. Endemic corruption suggests a pervasive failure to tap self-interest for productive purposes" (1999:2). There is therefore an inbuilt assumption that all corrupt practices are necessarily inefficient, and she favours a transition to a more impersonal society with strong market and public sector institutions. "Culture and history are explanations, not excuses," she argues, further stating that while her role is not to provide an in-depth analysis of the role of culture and history, she can, "point out when the legacy of the past no longer fits modern conditions" (Rose-Ackerman, 1999:5).

Analysts have also addressed culture more directly. With regard to Africa, a central debate has attempted to explain the prevalence of corruption with reference to culture, and has considered whether the embeddedness of corrupt practices can best be explained with reference to continuity or rupture (Blundo, 2006). Authors emphasizing continuity have argued that corruption is the result of a survival of traditional social practices and logics in a modern context (McMullan, 1961; Werlin, 1972). Their opponents, conversely, have argued that corruption is the result of a historic rupture that formed with the importation of the colonial state (Chabal & Daloz, 1999).

Anthropological Critiques

Anthropologists studying other social phenomena have become struck by the predominance of corruption narratives amongst their informants (Gupta, 1995; Shore & Haller, 2005; Smith, 2007). Zinn argues that corruption is "fundamentally 'good to think' [with]" (2005: 229), providing insight regarding, for example, relations of citizens with the state (Gupta, 1995), or regarding issues of socio-economic inequality (Smith, 2007). This has precipitated a surge in interest, leading to several critiques from interpretive anthropology.

Contextualizing Corruption

Standard definitions of corruption, particularly those focusing on legality, fail to take into account how participants and victims of corruption view and define corruption. In contrast, anthropologists such as Oliver de Sardan (1999) argue that people's perceptions of corruption, and their practices and experiences, need to be analysed. In particular, the public/private dichotomy, on which political science definitions of corruption centre, is questioned. Gupta (1995) argues that this dichotomy reifies the state, and disregards the manner in which ordinary people encounter the state in everyday life. Writing on India, he claims that, "[o]ne has a better chance of finding" public servants "at the roadside tea stalls and in their own homes than in their offices," claiming that public servants, "collapse [the] distinction not only between their roles as public servants and as private citizens at the site of their activity, but also in the style of operation" (Gupta, 1995: 384). Definitions of corruption that are closely aligned with this dichotomy, thus, are problematic. In another example, Smith (2007), in his study of how Nigerians speak about corruption, shows how a whole set of social practices, including medical quackery and deceiving a lover, are included under the notion of corruption, in addition to activities such as government bribery. Olivier de Sardan calls this set of social practices, which are associated with corruption, the "corruption complex" (1999: 25).

Narratives of Corruption

Gupta (1995) argues that looking at corruption and corruption discourse reflects information not only regarding the relationship between citizens and the state, but also about power relations and patterns of inclusion and exclusion. He argues that there is a performative aspect in the way corrupt transactions are carried out. He gives the example of

two low-level state officials in charge of regulating land access. When two young men approach the officials, the men are unable to perform the role of payees adequately, since the bribe they offer is too low. As a result, the officials humiliate the young men. This failed performance on the part of the young men ensures that the officials can exhort a larger bribe next time. Moreover, it expresses dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Gupta reports that when villagers complain about corruption, they are not only complaining about having to pay bribes, but are also expressing frustration because they lack the skills needed to effectively negotiate a bribe transaction. Lack of knowledge of the bribe price, or of whom to approach, can thus serve to exclude one from access to services.

Similarly, Smith (2007) argues that how Nigerians view corruption reveals an intertwining of popular morality, contemporary social processes, and postcolonial statecraft. Though discontent with corruption dominates discourse in Nigeria, many continue to participate in behaviours, which, though not strictly corrupt, enable and encourage corruption. In considering this paradox, Smith argues that the way in which Nigerians' talk about corruption, and the manner in which they classify practices as corrupt, reflects Nigerians' growing expectations and frustrations with democracy and development. He points out that patronage was historically important in Nigerian social organisation. Relations between elites and common people were based on reciprocity and a sense of mutual obligation. Today, many Nigerians believe that elites have hijacked this patronage system to pursue their own needs. Thus, while the use of patronage to help one's kin (e.g. string-pulling to secure a place in a university) is considered acceptable, elites who have managed to become rich quickly, and who have failed to share their wealth, are viewed as corrupt. Corruption discourse, thus, reflects dissatisfaction with economic and social inequalities, and is closely linked to matters of inclusion and exclusion. Zinn argues that the role of corruption in this regard is tied to issues of personal identity, writing that by recuperating aspects of

personal identity, "anthropology tells us things that a *Homo economicus* perspective on corruption, alone, cannot" (2005: 232). For example, since a *Homo economicus* perspective assumes that individuals are driven by self-interest, it fails to consider how familial expectations to use one's official role for the benefit of the family can shape one's identity.

Some Preliminary Conclusions

For the most part, then, political scientists have focused on "the 'political' side of corruption as a problem of the implementation and functioning of democratic institutions in 'complex' societies" (Zinn, 2005: 230). That is, there has been a strong focus on public institutions, and the public/private divide that is assumed to exist in modern societies. While political scientists have found it difficult to settle on one definition of corruption, organisations such as the World Bank have adopted the traditional definition of corruption as the "abuse of public office for private gain" (World Bank, 2000: para.5). How corruption is defined is important not only because definitions adopted impact how corruption is studied, but also because they affect what policies are implemented to deal with corruption. For example, on the basis of its definition, the World Bank has advocated a set of institutional changes that include policies concerning transparency, liberalisation and good governance (Shore & Haller, 2005).

The importance of the anthropological critique, hence, goes beyond questioning definitions; it allows for the probing of policy choices that flow from those definitions. Most importantly, however, by focusing on the point of view of the actors involved in corruption, the anthropological critique shows the complexity of corruption, and illustrates that an analysis of corruption cannot be constrained to the questioning of structures.

Moral Economy: Embedding Corruption in Cultural Logics

There is continuity between interpretive anthropology's attempts to understand the embeddedness of corruption in cultural logics, and earlier theories of moral economy developed by political scientists. Arnold (2001) argues that moral economy has both descriptive and prescriptive elements. The descriptive element focuses on non-economic norms and obligations that mediate relations between people. The prescriptive element, on the other hand, centres on "moral economy's status and value as an instrument for social and political analysis" (Arnold, 2001: 85), such as, for example, evaluating systems of exchange or explaining rebellion. Applying this framework to corruption, then, would allow one to consider what types of pressure non-economic norms may place on officials (descriptive element), and to use the moral economy framework to evaluate corruption (prescriptive element).

James C. Scott is one of the main proponents of the moral economy approach. Scott (1976) argues that the establishment of patron-client networks is an important part of livelihood organisation for people in the developing world. In *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, Scott (1976) argues that for many poor peasants, safety and reliability take precedence over profit. This subsistence ethic emphasises a network of kinsmen, who can help one during times of need. According to Scott, the state is generally regarded as less reliable than one's kin. Consequently, one's commitment to the state is at best ambivalent. Though Scott recognizes that this may involve some exploitation, he terms this arrangement a 'moral economy' (1976: 32), since it meets the peasants' primary goal of survival.

Scott's moral economy approach has faced criticism from commentators like Popkin (1979), who argues that Scott fails to recognize how markets benefit peasants. He argues that

peasants are rational problem-solvers, with a strong sense of both their own and others' interests. Thus, he posits that peasants continuously strive to improve their standard of living through investments and risk-taking. A second criticism attacks the concept of embeddedness, which is so central to the moral economy approach. According to Granovetter (1985) moral economists err in embedding "economic" behaviour so deeply in what they view to be the pertinent social relations that economic behaviour is not literally economic. They also present as economic behaviour what could better be attributed to a "generalized morality", which Granovetter explains to be a widely shared set of "implicit agreements to certain kinds of regard for others" (1985, cited in Arnold 2001: 87). Returning to corruption, it is instrumental to consider how anthropological studies of corruption have been impacted by the moral economy tradition, and whether the types of criticisms applied against the moral economy approach can likewise be adopted with respect to studies of corruption.

Scott himself applies the moral economy lens in evaluating corruption. In considering the relationship between elites and the less privileged, Scott shows how patterns of access and exclusion in the formal political apparatus help determine who will engage in corruption (1969). He argues that the influence of legislation through interest groups is often only available to elites, but that the political expression of interests does not only happen at the legislative stage. "Between the passage of legislation and its actual implementation lies an entirely different political arena that, in spite of its informality and particularism, has a great effect on the execution of policy" (Scott, 1969: 326). Thus, if peasants pay a small illegal contribution to their local tax collector to avoid paying a land tax, the overall impact is not very different from influencing government policy through a peasant union that fights for tax reductions. Consequently, he argues that corruption can benefit subaltern classes by serving as an alternative form of interest articulation. For these groups, it can become a normal channel of political activity (Scott, 1972).

A Moral Economy of Corruption

Writing on corruption in West Africa, and adopting the perspective of interpretive anthropology, Olivier de Sardan (1999) attempts to understand how corruption is embedded in cultural practices. In developing his 'moral economy of corruption' (1999: 25), he considers how value systems and cultural codes permit individuals to justify corruption, and how these codes anchor corruption in everyday practice. His use of the term 'moral economy' clearly makes reference to Scott's theories. However, his argument is not culturalist,[i] since he does not support essentialist and monolithic notions of culture. Rather, his goal is to "pinpoint certain *social norms* widely represented in modern Africa, which 'communicate' with or influence the practices of corruption" (Oliver de Sardan, 1999: 26, italics in original). He identifies a set of syncretic 'logics', which provide actors with certain room to manoeuvre, and which bear a 'family resemblance' (*ibid.*: 26) with corruption, but are not themselves understood as corruption. He argues that the existence of these logics helps to explain why "corruption finds, in contemporary Africa, such a favourable ground for its extension and generalisation, in short for its banalisation" (*ibid.*: 26).

In describing this moral economy of corruption, Olivier de Sardan poses several theses. Firstly, the moral economy of corruption is not concerned with corruption in a strict narrow sense (e.g., as defined by Nye), but with a 'corruption complex' (1999: 26), which covers a number of illicit practices, some of which may be technically distinct from corruption. Secondly, corruption in Africa is generalised and banalised, even though it is strongly recriminated in both public and private discourse. Thirdly, corruption is cumulative and expands, usually from the top down, though there is no evident relationship between the type of political regime in power and the extent of corruption. Finally, the practices that form the corruption complex, though legally culpable, are generally viewed by their perpetrators as

legitimate. Consequently, the distinction between the corrupt and the non-corrupt is blurred, shifting, and context-dependent.

Additionally, in an effort to explain the relationship between culture and the corruption complex, Olivier de Sardan identifies a set of "cultural logics", which influence this complex. The first three consider relations in society more generally. Firstly, the logics of negotiation focus on bargaining. According to Olivier de Sardan, corruption has historically often been analysed as a transaction. Since transactions involve costs, they usually include bargaining. However, argues Olivier de Sardan, bargaining is likewise important in other social transactions in Africa, including marriage. Secondly, there are logics of gift-giving. The practice of 'kola', or gift-giving, mostly as a thank you for services provided, is common in Sahelian countries, and is considered a moral duty. Today, however, this gift-giving is often monetary, and since its goal may be to pave the way for future collaboration, the line between gifts and bribes is thin. Finally, there are logics of solidarity networks, which are significantly wider than in the North.

The second set of logics is linked to functions of authority, and includes logics of predatory authority and of redistributive accumulation. The former argues that individuals holding positions of power feel that they have a prerogative to engage in extortion. For example, a policeman may feel that he has a right to deduct dues from transport vehicles. The latter argues that civil servants face social pressure from relatives to spread the benefits of their position.

These logics, thus, aid in the banalisation of corruption. Oliver de Sardan argues that all "these logics are syncretic, none is 'traditional', none comes directly form any so-called pre-colonial culture" (1999: 44), yet these cultural logics do influence corruption. Over-monetization of African economies, and the role of shame as a means of social control,[ii]

further facilitate the blurring and erosion of the line between these cultural logics and corrupt practices, allowing people to explain away corrupt behaviour.

The benefit of Olivier de Sardan's analysis is its ability to account for the impact of cultural practices on corruption, while not simply placing blame with culture. Moreover, it helps to explain the embeddedness of corruption in administrative practices. Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2006) conclude that in Africa, a widespread system of corruption exists, which is embedded in a system of 'informal functioning' that operates as a set of concentric circles with basic forms of corruption at the centre (e.g., commission paid for illicit services), and moves to broader practices (e.g., 'perks' such as company cars which come with certain posts). Thus, there is difficulty in drawing a line between more basic forms of corruption and these wider practices.

A Market Economy of Corruption

As was previously mentioned, there are two strands of analysis within anthropology: interpretive and political-economy analysis. According to Marcus and Fischer (1986), while interpretive anthropologists focus on the study of symbols, meanings and mentality, political-economy anthropologists want to account for power relations and history, and to "represent the embedding of richly described local cultural worlds in larger impersonal systems of political economy" (Marcus & Fischer, 1986: 77). Marcus and Fischer argue that the two approaches need to be reconciled, but believe that it is difficult to do so adequately.

Olivier de Sardan's analysis suffers from an inability to account for both of these perspectives. Ethnographic evidence shows that Olivier de Sardan's moral economy approach overlooks the centrality of fixed prices in certain corrupt transactions. Fixed prices are an indicator that corrupt practices are embedded not only in cultural logics of social practices, but also in markets, particularly in instances where corruption is institutionalised.

Price in Ethnographies of Corruption

A closer look at ethnographic evidence reveals the importance of price in many instances of corruption. In Gupta's example of land registry officials, after the two young men fail to pay the appropriate price for adding their name to the registry, one of the officials tells them to find out "what it cost[s]" (1995: 380). When the two young men ask the other villagers visiting the officials about the price, they receive approximately equal price quotes from all of them.

In his ethnography of corruption in Western Bengal, Ruud (2000) considers the importance of social networks in pursuing strategic goals and survival strategies. He gives the example of Kalo, who, in an effort to obtain a job at a local hospital, resorted to three different avenues to influence the hospital's selection process. He firstly approached one of the men involved in the selection through a common acquaintance. The man, however, declared himself against favouritism. Kalo then, through his cousin, approached a hospital clerk. The price of the clerk's help was too steep, and Kalo decided to pursue the position by other means. A third contact, again made through a friend, was at first promising. In discussing the price involved, the man made it clear that in return for his help, Kalo had to arrange an introduction with his well-placed brother-in-law. After making some inquiries of his own, Kalo concluded that the man was not sufficiently reliable, and decided to once again pursue other avenues. Kalo's search continued, but in the end, he was unable to obtain the position in question.

In analysing Kalo's case, Ruud (2000) emphasizes the importance of social networks, arguing that this game of personal contacts only reluctantly came to involve money. The example does show that patterns of inclusion and exclusion can be established through one's

social networks. However, it also indicates that had Kalo been able to pay the price demanded by the hospital clerk, he would have obtained the desired position.

Bako Arifari's (2006) ethnographic examination of the transport and customs sector in West Africa reveals the importance of fixed prices. Bako Arifari participated in a delivery of sheep from Malanville to Cotonou. During the 750 km trip, the driver paid sixteen bribes; furthermore, he knew exactly how much to pay to each type of official. In one instance, the driver ignored a patrol since he knew on the basis of insignia that those forces were on a security patrol and were not allowed to ask for money. He commented that these patrols are only successful in obtaining money from new drivers, who are unaware of this fact. While the driver accepts the regular paying of bribes as a normal part of doing business, he views the extortion of this illegitimate form of bribe as unacceptable. More generally, transport workers are willing to pay bribes since the time saving improves efficiency, offsetting the cost.

What is striking about Baku Arifari's example is that it shows how corruption is institutionalised. The price of transactions is fixed. Police officers are open in asking for bribes when checking documents, uttering statements such as "We don't eat the papers" (Baku Arifari, 2006: 196). What may have previously been an illicit transaction begins to take on the form of a 'toll'. In addition, the extent of corruption goes beyond the place where the bribe transaction takes place. Police officers use bribe money to pay supervisors to maintain good relations and aid professional advancement. Baku Arifari also points out that money from bribes is used to maintain the delivery of services. Since the state is unable to provide sufficient funds, bribe money is used to purchase supplies such as paper for printing reports. In a sense, argues Baku Arifari, "almost all of the services provided are privatised to a greater or lesser extent" (2006: 180).

These examples indicate that although Olivier de Sardan's (1999) idea of moral economy explains how cultural dynamics influence corruption, it fails to adequately account

for the embeddedness of corruption in dynamics of political economy. The fixed prices observed indicate the high degree of institutionalisation of corruption, and the transactions observed appear to be rather impersonal. Following Granovetter's (1985) critique of moral economy more generally, there is a need to steer clear of the danger of oversocialising practices that are embedded not only in social relations but also in markets.

Conclusion

Anthropological discussions of corruption account for the manner in which participants and victims talk about corruption, and more adequately address the interplay of culture, exchange and interaction in corruption. However, the same ethnographic evidence that is used in these discussions also permits the questioning of interpretive anthropological theories of corruption.

In addition, ethnography allows the deconstruction of dichotomies such as that between participant and victim. Baku Arifari's (2006) discussion of police officers shows that since police are expected to pay bribes to supervisors, they may feel that they are victims of corruption, and that they have no choice but to be corrupt themselves.

Together with the importance of fixed prices in various ethnographies of corruption, this indicates that more attention should be placed on the study of how corrupt practices are embedded in political economy and on how they become institutionalised. The study of corruption would benefit from an attempt to adopt the perspective of both interpretive anthropology and political economy. Baku Arifari's discussion of police corruption nicely illustrates the need for a balance between the two perspectives. While bribing may be fairly impersonal and institutionalised, these transactions do not meet the assumptions of neoclassical economics, for example, which argue that the identity of buyers and sellers is not important. In this instance, the identity of police officers as police, and the symbolism

associated with this identity, is central to the transaction. As a result, though finding the right equilibrium of commitment to interpretive anthropology and political economy in the study of corruption may be difficult, it would be a worthy effort. Besides broadening the understanding of corruption, such an undertaking would also benefit the study of the state. By allowing the deconstruction of the victim/participant dichotomy, for example, Baku Arifari's work illuminates relations between the state, state officials, and citizens.

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[i] Associated with economic anthropology, the 'culturalist' position, as espoused by Gudeman, for example, attempts to present "people's own economic construction" (1986: 1), not just of values, but of economics as well.

[ii] For example, a civil servant may feel shame if he fails to meet family expectations.

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