The Anthropology of Corruption

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Wenner-Gren Symposium Supplement 18

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Corruption is in the eye of the beholder. And yet it makes for an excellent focus of anthropological comparison, as the articles in this special issue of *Current Anthropology* make clear. Articles that take a deep dive into changing notions of legitimacy and how they shape what counts as corruption (Feldman 2018; Pardo 2018; Schneider 2018). Articles about what corruption means, and what it means to combat it in places exposed to the rhythms of global capitalism and transformations in the politics and perceived enemies of the nation-state (Bocarejo 2018; Hetherington 2018; Nugent 2018). Articles about anti-corruption campaigns that end up spawning new kinds of abuses (Feldman 2018; Osburg 2018; Shore 2018; Smart 2018). Articles that show how the term is used to conjure an innocent past, or a proudest present, in a world where the old distinction between the primitive and the modern takes the form of talk about good and bad governance and successful and failed states (Ansell 2018; Bocarejo 2018). Articles that show how critiques of corruption can conjure utopian futures, where the promise of popular sovereignty makes itself felt (Hornberger 2018; Musaraj 2018; Sharma 2018; Smith 2018; Tidey 2018).

The papers for this special issue were initially written for a Wenner-Gren Foundation Symposium held September 9–15, 2016, at Tivoli Palácio de Seteais in Sintra, Portugal (fig. 1). The participants traveled to Portugal from a range of institutional homes, in Canada, Colombia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. They shared findings from fieldwork conducted in a range of settings, from mule trails in the coastal mountains of Colombia to banquet halls in urban China. Diana Bocarejo came from the Universidad del Rosario to discuss her work in the coastal mountains of Colombia, where mule drivers swept up in drug trafficking followed by a tourist boom engage in ethical everyday deliberations that offer a trenchant critique of legality, corruption, and the state. Aaron Ansell of Virginia Tech offered a fascinating depiction of political clientelism in Northeast Brazil and how local people draw a distinction between illegitimate vote buying and morally upright transactions with the politicians they seek to elect. David Nugent from Emory University drew a comparison between the contemporary concern with corruption and the anxieties that motivated anti-Communist purges in mid-twentieth-century Peru. Ilana Feldman came from George Mason University with a paper showing how Palestinian refugees and humanitarian workers have come together in relations of care and suspicion, and how their concerns about corruption prove critical in determining what humanitarianism is and should be.

Alan Smart from the University of Calgary told a story from Hong Kong’s history involving boat squatters, street-level bureaucrats, and a series of colonial-era reforms that left room for collusion between corporate leaders and officials in the highest echelons of the state. John Osburg of the University of Rochester showed how recent crackdowns in post-Mao China have reconfigured the relationship between corruption and class formation among various segments of the elite. Jane Schneider from the City University of New York and Italo Pardo from the University of Kent drew from their first-hand experiences to describe how Italian efforts to stamp out organized crime have shaped national and local politics and everyday life. Sylvia Tidey from the University of Amsterdam, Anu Sharma from Wesleyan University, Smoki Musaraj from Ohio University, and Kregg Hetherington from Concordia University told rich stories of the surprising effects of anti-corruption campaigns in Indonesia, India, Albania, and Paraguay. Julia Hornberger of the University of the Witwatersrand, Cris Shore of the University of Auckland, and Daniel Jordan Smith of Brown University brought the conversation closer to home: to Hornberger’s students and their memories of paying bribes to get their driver’s licenses; to Shore’s university, which hired a global accounting firm to combat corruption, even though very few cases had come to light; to Smith’s Nigerian informants and their reactions to his study of corruption—-which included a lawsuit threatened by someone named in the book.

The organizers, Sarah Muir and Akhil Gupta (2018), knew the symposium would traffic in questions of ethics, politics, and inequality. What they didn’t expect was how talk of corruption shapes spatial imaginings: some regions are by definition corrupt, and whether or not a practice is taken as legitimate has to do with where it is done, with certain offices, street corners, and nation-states associated with the subtle, yet highly conventionalized dealings through which corruption is said to work. This is the magic of a Wenner-Gren symposium: it brings together new interlocutors to yield new insights. It is also the magic of ethnography, when it comes to this topic: it is uniquely suited to follow the threads that connect people and their projects and to make sense of how they justify what they do.

**Danilyn Rutherford** is President of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (470 Park Avenue South, 8th Floor, New York, New York 10016, USA [drutherford@wennergren.org]). Electronically published 23 III 18.

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Other Wenner-Gren symposia have taken up some of the issues raised in this gathering, from changes in the mapping of the public and the private to the ways regimes of value can coexist and clash. Most recently, these include Politics of the Urban Poor (Das and Randeria 2015), The Life and Death of the Secret (Manderson, Davis, and Colwell 2015), Crisis, Value, and Hope: Rethinking the Economy (Narotsky and Besnier 2014), and Corporate Lives: New Perspectives on the Social Life of the Corporate Form (Partridge, Welker, and Hardin 2011). This symposium’s earliest predecessors include Kinship and Culture (Hsu 2017 [1971]), Local-Level Politics (Swartz 1968), and Law in Culture and Society (Nader 1969).

Wenner-Gren symposia provide a unique opportunity for invited scholars to meet for intensive discussion of important issues in anthropology. Symposia are partnerships between the Foundation and the academic organizers, and we are always looking for new and important ideas from all branches of anthropology for future symposia and eventual publication in Current Anthropology. We are eager to hear from anyone who has in mind a topic that could spur the kind of field-furthering conversations that made this symposium so productive. Information about the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the symposium program, and what makes for a good symposium topic can be found on our website at http://wennergren.org/programs/international-symposia.

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Rethinking the Anthropology of Corruption
An Introduction to Supplement 18
by Sarah Muir and Akhil Gupta

In our introduction to this special issue, we take stock of where the anthropological literature on corruption has come and where it might go next. Our goal is neither to provide an exhaustive literature review nor to summarize the papers gathered together in this issue. Rather, we aim to identify especially promising areas in need of more focused research and analytic attention and to articulate pressing questions within those areas. Toward that end, we theorize corruption as an object of analysis by framing it as a globalized concept, the practical and social life of which anthropology is especially well suited to study. Finally, we specify how such an approach is especially helpful in disentangling the stubborn problematic that have so persistently dogged both analytic and practical engagements with corruption.

An Anthropology of Corruption?
In many ways, corruption would seem an ideal object of anthropological analysis. The term conjures clandestine transactions outside officially recognized channels; hidden alliances and intimacies; and the rumors, scandals, and gossip that swirl around those illicit and cryptic relations. Within the academic division of labor, anthropology has long taken up the task of teasing out the significance of just these sorts of political, economic, and discursive practices—practices that do not abide by the institutional norms of modern states, markets, and publics but that are nonetheless central to the lived reality of those institutions.

And yet, for some time, corruption received scant attention from anthropologists. Over the past few decades, corruption has become an object of intense popular concern in different parts of the world. At the same time, a robust body of scholarship has arisen in disciplines such as economics and political science, scholarship that has helped shape a globally circulating set of anti-corruption campaigns, policies, and laws. Nonetheless, anthropologists—justifiably wary of reproducing clichéd images of political dysfunction, especially in postcolonial and other contexts that routinely bear the brunt of transnational governance—have often approached the topic with reserve, even reticence.

Recently, however, a sizable corpus of anthropological literature on corruption has begun to coalesce. Examining a variety of illegitimate, illegal, or otherwise irregular political and economic practices, as well as critical discourses about those practices, this literature has developed a properly anthropological approach to corruption. That approach challenges commonplace stereotypes regarding political cultures outside the Global North, even as it also takes seriously the vehement complaints about corruption that have energized so many citizens around the world.

The essays in this special issue of *Current Anthropology* come out of a Wenner-Gren symposium convened in September 2016 to take stock of the anthropology of corruption. Seventeen anthropologists working in a wide range of geographic locations—including China, Europe, Southeast Asia, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East—gathered to think comparatively about where the anthropology of corruption has taken us and to consider where it might go next. Speaking across geographic, topical, and theoretical differences, we debated whether we could identify common patterns to corruption. We wondered whether the phenomenon of corruption could even be said to hold together in any analytically defensible way. We considered what might be a specifically anthropological approach to corruption. And we asked what such an approach might contribute to a number of debates: to broad conversations within anthropology about the state and bureaucracy, exchange and politics, ethics and the law; to scholarly arguments on...
the topic of corruption within and across other disciplinary traditions; and to the work of policy makers and others grappling with corruption outside academe.

As luck would have it, the symposium occurred in the last months of a US presidential campaign dominated by concerns regarding the collusion of political and financial elites, stark socioeconomic inequality, and long-term histories of marginalization and disenfranchisement. The full repercussions of that election are still unknown. Nonetheless, at a bare minimum, the campaign and the first year of Trump’s presidency illustrate the stakes for an anthropology of corruption in the contemporary moment. We are compelled to ask, When and how does corruption become available as an idiom for articulating claims of illegitimacy, inequality, and ethical probity? What difference does the idiom of corruption make for the success of those claims? In short, what are the conditions of possibility for anti-corruption politics and what are the limits of that mode of politics?

As Shore and Haller (2005:6) note, most anthropologists—including the majority of the authors writing in this issue—come to study corruption by accident rather than by design. That this should be the case indicates how overlooked corruption has been as an object of anthropological analysis and suggests the need to raise a set of questions to further theorize corruption as an object of study. With this in mind, our goal in this introduction is neither to provide an exhaustive literature review nor to summarize the papers gathered together in this special issue. Rather, we aim to map the terrain of the anthropology of corruption so as to identify especially promising areas in need of more focused research and analytic attention. In so doing, we specify how an anthropological approach can disentangle the stubborn problematic that have so persistently dogged both analytic and practical engagements with corruption. Toward that end, we begin by laying out a way of conceptualizing corruption as a globalized concept, the practical and social life of which anthropology is especially well suited to study.

Corruption’s Transgressions

Whatever else it is, “corruption” is a category of transgression, in several senses. First, corruption names the transgression (or “blurring”; see Gupta 2012) of boundaries, particularly between the public and the private. As an array of scholars have argued, the public/private distinction grew out of but diverged from European medieval political theology and became fundamental to the ideological and bureaucratic structures of modern states and markets (Arendt 1958; Corrigan and Sayer 1985; Habermas 1991 [1962]; Kantorowicz 1958; Marx 1978 [1846]; Polanyi 1944; Weber 1978 [1922]). And yet, as all the articles in this issue demonstrate so clearly, maintaining that distinction and policing movements across it are fraught matters. Precisely because corruption blurs boundaries, it calls forth efforts to clarify limits and to redefine social relations (Feldman 2018). In this sense, the specter of corruption haunts modern politics and economics, threatening the legitimacy of states and markets while simultaneously animating repetitive, incomplete attempts to cleanse and legitimate the political-economic order (Bratsis 2003; Bubandt 2014; Lomnitz 1995; Nuijten and Anders 2009; and Sharma 2018).

Corruption is also transgressive in its capacity to elide definitions. Within academia and beyond, corruption today is often associated with the neoliberal policy imperatives of organizations such as Transparency International, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank (Anders 2008; Hasty 2005; Hetherington 2013; Sanders and West 2003). However, the category also evokes longer-term, intertwined traditions of republican, liberal, and democratic thinking about substantive and procedural justice, about inequality and civic virtue, and about the proper relationship between economic resources and political authority (Locke 1988 [1698]; Machiavelli 1970 [1517]; Montesquieu 2001 [1748]; O’Donnell 2007; Pocock 1975; Rawls 1971). If always condemnatory rather than laudatory in tone, the category of corruption is nonetheless extraordinarily polyvalent, for it does not refer to a determinate set of practices or relations. Differentiating between the “appropriation of public goods for personal gain” and “privatization,” for example, or between “governmental distortion of the market” and “regulation,” or, indeed, between a “bribe” and a “gift,” is always a performative judgment that invites disagreement across the entangled fields of legality and legitimacy (Smart 1993). In other words, which transactions can be categorized as corrupt can never be a definitional question; it is always necessarily perspectival, evaluative, and performative (Bocarejo 2018; de Sardan 1999; Granovetter 2007; Humphrey 2000; Ledenéva 1998; Pardo 2018; Pierce 2016; Roitman 2005).

Far from being a liability, this lack of definitional precision is crucial to corruption’s success as a globally circulating concept that traverses geographic boundaries, sociocultural contexts, and institutional structures. It is nearly impossible to argue convincingly in favor of corruption. To be sure, a small section of the literature in the economics of corruption did suggest, in contrarian fashion, that corruption might further the social good, perhaps by greasing the wheels of rigid bureaucratic machines (e.g., Nye 1967).4 However, that

3. The extensive and intensive range of corruption is extraordinarily unwieldy, a fact that we take to be essential to its social utility. As such, we do not attempt to chart its varied meanings, either diachronically across different historical periods or synchronically across various social contexts.

4. More recently, on the eve of Trump’s inauguration, Peter Thiel—Silicon Valley billionaire, techno-futurist, and avowed anti-democrat—mused that some degree of corruption may well be a welcome quality in the incoming presidential administration: “No corruption can be a bad thing,” he opined (Dowd 2016).

2. Readers interested in more detailed reviews of the literature on corruption, both anthropological and otherwise, should consult the informative and insightful introductions to the collected volumes edited by Barcham, Hindess, and Larmour (2012), Nuijten and Anders (2009), Pardo (2004), Shore and Haller (2005), and Buchan and Hill (2014), as well as the review by Wedel (2012).
proposition troubles the principle of popular sovereignty on which nearly all modern governments, from the most authoritarian to the most democratic, base their claims to legitimacy (a dynamic we return to in the concluding section of this introduction). It therefore remains an outlier within policy, academic, and lay discourse around the world. Because corruption is at once definitionally unclear but definitively negative in valence, people in diverse contexts can easily take it up to identify and condemn social ills of all sorts and with all manner of consequences. In this special issue alone, for example, the reader will find examples of concerns with corruption furthering social critique (Musaraj 2018) and consolidating elites (Osburg 2018), empowering grassroots activists (Schneider 2018) and erecting barriers to political participation (Hetherington 2018). In fact, in many contexts, opposition to corruption has become the very definition of “good governance,” gathering together under a single, unsailable, and remarkably anodyne banner policies and social movements that pursue divergent, even irreconcilable, ends.

Finally, corruption transgresses normative conceptions of historical progress. As a key category of modern political economy— anxiously naming that which must be expelled in order to assure legitimacy—corruption typically indexes the nonmodern. It is essential to note that this alleged resistance to modernizing progress takes on very different forms depending on the social space on which it is mapped. In centers of power within the United States and Europe, corruption names the alleged deterioration of institutions and civic virtues. In such contexts, corruption entails a sense of cancerous erosion and decline, and it therefore amounts to a call to return to a golden age of civilizational integrity.5 However, in places long marked as “behind” (see Fabian 1983), corruption tends to conjure the motif of stagnancy rather than regression. In such contexts, the failure of postcolonial state and market institutions to eradicate mass poverty and to secure access to basic necessities has meant that many people engage in “informal” (Hart 1973) activities that can fall under the category of small-scale or petty corruption. These everyday measures mobilize existing social relations and practices toward new ends, transforming them in the process. Nonetheless, they can sometimes appear to be simply the stubborn persistence of culture (de Sardan 1999), a framing that risks reproducing colonial-era distinctions between the modern and the traditional and thus foreclosing the possibility of seeing in these measures the elements of new forms of citizenship and law (cf. Chatterjee 2006; Obarrio 2007; Roitman 2005). Thus, for different reasons, in both the Global North and the Global South, the temporality of corruption tends to focus attention on the present in relation to the past. What is lost in so doing is a robust reimagining of the present in terms of desirable futures.

These varied transgressions make corruption an especially unruly topic for scholarly and practical engagement. How, then, can we approach the question of corruption? How can we take seriously the concerns so many have with corruption if we cannot define, let alone measure it? How can we think comparatively about something so labile and polyvalent without resorting to a facile and misleading nominalism? And how should we treat a concept honed in European traditions of political philosophy that exerts stringent normative demands on actors in non-European, especially postcolonial, contexts?

We begin by considering corruption as a part of the class that Trouillot (2003:26) called “North Atlantic universals,” that is, concepts like development, democracy, and civil society that “project transhistorical relevance while hiding the particularities of their marks and origins” (see also Chakrabarty 2000). When taken up as analytics, these universalizing concepts can allow a speaker to move seamlessly between descriptive and normative claims, obscuring the difference between the two. For that reason, they can easily map peoples and nations onto all-too-familiar racialized and civilizational hierarchies.

Rather than take them up as analytics, anthropology is especially well situated to meeting the methodological challenges of studying the practical and social life of these North Atlantic universals. The discipline’s insistent combination of grounded ethnography and comparative scope allows analysts to track back and forth between local and translocal dynamics so as to illuminate how abstract concepts—like corruption—are lived out in particular, concrete instantiations. A broadly anthropological approach allows analysts to track the circulation of corruption as an idea with a decided local genesis but global reach and as a folk concept employed by elites as well as by people challenging elite prerogatives.6 In short, an anthropology of corruption allows scholars to interrogate the social life of corruption as a concept-in-the-world that simultaneously transforms—and is transformed by—the particular social worlds in which it finds fertile soil.

The authors of the essays in this issue draw on an array of theoretical frameworks to investigate corruption across divergent social, geographic, and historical locations. However, that diversity belies a more fundamental common ground, for all of the essays exemplify this broadly anthropological attention to the practical, social life of concepts. The essays that follow take seriously concerns with corruption, whether they

5. See Pocock’s (1975) reading of Machiavelli (1970 [1517]) for a paradigmatic articulation of this version of corruption. See Montesquieu (2001 [1748]) and Hardt and Negri (2000:20–21) for related mobilizations of “corruption” as civilizational decay. Less common in the contemporary moment are temporal conceptions of corruption as a fall from a natural state of virtue. We see this latter understanding of corruption in the works of writers such as Montaigne (1948 [1580]), Rousseau (1992 [1755]), and Thoreau (2016 [1854]), and it is worth considering why it is relatively absent today. We return to this question very briefly in a footnote in the conclusion, but it merits more analytic attention than we can offer in these brief introductory remarks.

6. We hope it is clear, then, that we do not mean “corruption” to describe only the practices of the elite as opposed to the subaltern. Neither do we impute a moral valence to any of the practices that could fall within the category.
are the concerns of activists or policy makers, of admin-
istrators or disenfranchised communities, or indeed of other
academics and theorists. However, rather than take those
concerns as self-evident, the authors in this issue approach
them as social facts in and of themselves, emerging from and
shaped by particular contexts and histories. In so doing, they
bring together under a single analytical gaze both the logics of
practice undergirding the exchanges that (some) people judge
as corrupt and the logics of evaluation through which such
judgments are rendered. The result is a dynamic collection of
essays that resonate with one another across a number of
analytic domains.

In what follows of this introduction, we sketch five of those
domains—the corruption/anti-corruption complex, ethical and
legal judgments, circulatory conditions, affective states, and axes
of inequality. Within each domain, we pose a handful of ques-
tions to which the anthropology of corruption might next turn
its attention. Finally, we return to the overarching concerns
about the possibilities and limitations of anti-corruption politics
that we articulated at the outset and suggest that concerns with
corruption are indissolubly bound up with commitments to
political equality and popular sovereignty.

The Corruption/Anti-corruption Complex

Corruption and anti-corruption need to be conceptualized not
as two discrete things but, rather, as one complex phenomen-
on. Given our discussion above of corruption as a category of
transgression, we can easily see why. The threat or actuality of
corruption calls forth its opposition, animating attempts to
police and defend the distinction between political authority
and economic resources and between the commonwealth and
private property. But those differentiations themselves elicit
transgression, whether for reasons of profit or efficiency. What
is more, which side of the distinction is at risk of encroachment
and contamination is a historically variable question, as
Nugent (2018) argues in his comparison of mid-twentieth-
century concerns with corruption and those of the neoliberal
era. The dialectic of corruption and anti-corruption is there-
fore in constant movement, as each anti-corruption effort
transforms the logic of corrupt practices and each corrupt
practice calls forth new kinds of anti-corruption measures.
That dialectic produces long-term social histories such as the
one that Schneider (2018) offers in her account of over 50 years
of mafia corruption and anti-mafia efforts in Sicily.

Because of this dynamic, anti-corruption efforts routinely
produce unintended and unwanted consequences. For exam-
ple, as Smart (2018) demonstrates in his analysis of attempts to
curb the discretionary powers of petty officers in colonial
Hong Kong, the push toward greater legal precision in defining
corruption can ease the way for savvy actors to game the
system, as they engage in practices that stay—just barely—
within legal limits. Somewhat differently, Shore’s (2018) dis-
cussion of anti-corruption surveillance in universities suggests
that anti-corruption efforts can narrow the scope of acceptable
behavior so drastically that they actually encourage people to
skirt the rules. Legalistic modes of anti-corruption can also
have the effect of distracting people from forms of corruption
that might be popularly illegitimate but are nonetheless legal
(Gupta 2017; Pardo 2018). And so, each law begets more laws in
a perpetually expanding process that can threaten to swal-
low up entirely the realm of politics (Sharma 2018).

Nonetheless, anti-corruption efforts can conjure a positive,
aspirational image of a legitimate society grounded in just law and
meritocratic distribution. As such, the logic of anti-corruption
has the potential to serve as a powerful political tool for those
who have been excluded from elite networks of influence and
access (Pardo 2018; Sharma 2018). Nonetheless, that potential
is often exceedingly difficult to actualize. At times, the poetics
and forms of anti-corruption come to mimic uncannily the
corrupt practices that are its targets, and the effect is a discon-
certering lack of clarity about how to distinguish one from the other
(Musaraj 2018). At other times, the promise of anti-corruption
retains something of its earnest appeal, but it comes to seem
something reserved for other places populated by other, better
people (Muir 2016; Tidey 2018).

Given the complex and shifting ways that corruption and
anti-corruption are intertwined, several questions arise that an
anthropological approach is well suited to pursue. First, how
can we think with more nuance and precision about how
different kinds of corrupt practice might call for different
modes of anti-corruption? Can we identify a wider range of
anti-corruption possibilities, especially nonlegalistic measures
that escape the logic of audit culture, perhaps by employing
interpersonal or informal mechanisms to discourage illegiti-
mate behavior (Hasty 2005)? How should we conceptualize the
differences and points of convergence between what we might
term “vernacular” or “grassroots” anti-corruption efforts and
officially sanctioned crackdowns? Finally, how should we
understand the roles that poetics and institutional location
play in shaping the diversity of forms that corruption and anti-
corruption can take?

Ethical and Legal Judgments

To pursue these questions about the corruption/anti-corruption
complex is necessarily to study socially situated judgments about
fairness and justice and about the proper relationship between
economic resources and political power. Of course, ethical and
legal judgments about these matters do not necessarily coa-
lesce, as both Pardo’s (2018) discussion of legal corruption in
Italy and Sharma’s (2018) analysis of anti-corruption laws in
India demonstrate so vividly. It is precisely that lack of align-
ment between the ethical and the legal that makes the corrup-
tion/anti-corruption complex such a productive site for debate,
mobilization, and contestation.7

7. The title of Pardo’s (2004) edited volume Between Morality and the
Law nicely evokes the conflictual space between ethical and legal
judgments.
In popular parlance, to decry something as “corrupt” usually refers not to legal codes, strictly speaking, nor even to civic codes of ethics. Rather, the epithet tends to invoke a quasi-theological framing of right and wrong, of purity and contamination (Bratsis 2003; see also Douglas 1966). Because of this connotation, the discourse of corruption can operate as a form of antipolitics (Ferguson 1994) that risks shifting debates about social relations onto a doxic (Bourdieu 1977 [1972]:164) or legalistic (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006) terrain within which certain imperatives are beyond dispute. Indeed, over the past several decades, many places around the world have seen a steady stream of anti-corruption measures driven by the nearly unquestionable imperatives of “transparency” and “accountability” (Hetherington 2013; Sampson 2010; Strathern 2000). As several essays in this issue suggest, such measures can set in motion practical dynamics that limit or even undermine people’s capacity to achieve the substantive goals and values of the institutions they inhabit (Feldman 2018; Hetherington 2018; Smart 2018; Tidey 2016).

However, even the most dogmatic discourse of anti-corruption can give rise to a more open-ended dynamic. Fueled by an underdetermined moral imaginary, condemnations of corruption can enable critiques that question and go beyond dominant forms of politics and law (Pardo 2018). At times, the space opened by critiques of corruption lies on the margins of the state, as in the case Bocarejo (2018) examines, in which Colombian peasants’ experiences of legal and illegal economies involve ethical deliberations rooted firmly outside the space of the state and its laws. However, as Nugent’s (2018) analysis of anti-corruption efforts in mid-twentieth-century Peru demonstrates, critiques of corruption can also create fissures at the very heart of the state apparatus, to immensely destabilizing effect. In his case, the struggle to weed out corruption creates a paranoid political class and bureaucratic apparatus that makes the state unrecognizable as a modern bureaucratic state at the very same time that it aspires to become one.

In this sense, it is crucial to emphasize the decidedly perspectival nature of judgments about corruption. Indeed, we see time and again in the essays gathered here that what is clearly corrupt from one point of view can be entirely justifiable from another. Thus, for example, the essays by Ansell (2018), Hetherington (2018), and Osburg (2018) all argue persuasively that personalistic exchanges with state actors can, in certain circumstances, ameliorate patterns of exclusion, marginalization, and alienation (see also Ansell 2014; Verdery 2003). Relatedly, the essays by Nugent (2018), Smith (2018), and Tidey (2018) explore how accusations of corruption can function as powerful but unpredictable political weapons, capable of subjecting normally tolerated practices to harsh scrutiny and opprobrium.

Despite this perspectivalism, judgments about which behaviors are intolerably corrupt do tend to possess a sort of family resemblance with one another. It is possible to chart any given exchange along a series of linked continua: short- to long-term, closed to open-ended, depersonalized to concretely interpersonal. These continua routinely map onto ideological distinctions between socially disembedded market economies governed by a relatively amoral logic of self-interest and socially embedded gift economies governed by a thoroughly moralized logic of obligation (Bohannon 1955; Graeber 2011; Mauss 1967 [1925]; Sahlins 1974). In general, the anthropological literature suggests that relatively short-term, closed, and depersonalized exchanges tend to be restricted to social spaces or “transactional orders” (Bloch and Parry 1989) dedicated explicitly to them. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that market-style transactions in nonmarket contexts tend to receive especially swift and unforgiving condemnation (Hornberger 2018). By contrast, exchanges that lack a clear logic of quid pro quo are often much more difficult to censure because they are thoroughly entangled with legitimate interpersonal relations and commitments (Ansell 2018; Lomnitz 1971).

The issue of judgment becomes especially fraught in contexts where people find themselves troubled by the ethics of their own actions. This is frequently the case when people find that their pursuit of widely shared goals requires violating equally widely shared values (Hornberger 2018; Smith 2018; Tidey 2018). The stance of self-recrimination that often follows is ambiguous, compelling people sometimes to assess the legal and political terrain as illegitimate and at other times to resign themselves to that illegitimacy. However it plays out, this sort of conundrum may be far more common than the literature would indicate. If so, it suggests that there are untapped and undertheorized reservoirs of discontent and (self-)critique at the very heart of at least some corrupt practices (Muir 2016).8

Researchers would do well to attend to these sorts of discomfiting self-critiques and ambiguous judgments, which characterize so many people’s engagements with corruption and anti-corruption. Those dynamic evaluative stances pose considerable challenges to some recent works in the anthropology of ethics that have moved away from the question of judgment in an effort to situate the ethical in largely tacit, everyday practice (e.g., Lambek 2010). In recentering judgment as itself a mode of practice, analyses of corruption have the opportunity to pursue several questions that have not yet been fully explored in the literature, anthropological or otherwise: How does the fact of actual or potential judgment shape the logic of a given act? How do people move between ethics, legality, and other modes of evaluation in forming judgments about their own and others’ acts? How do people hold competing, even contradictory, judgments? And, finally, does that experience of paradox or cognitive dissonance afford any hitherto unnoticed spaces for political possibilities? As this last question suggests, conceptualizing judgment as itself possessing a practical logic and inquiring into the affordances offered by particular practices of judgment would also speak directly to contemporary attempts to retheorize the relationship between ethics and politics (see Hankins, forthcoming; Tambar 2017).

8. Normative definitions of corruption fail to understand such contradictions, thereby missing significant social phenomena.
Circulatory Conditions

If the corruption/anti-corruption complex always involves socially situated judgments, an essential part of its analysis is to specify the contexts in which those judgments are viable and the publics for whom those judgments are important. Running throughout the essays of this issue, therefore, is a persistent undercurrent of questions concerning how practices and discourses of corruption circulate: What conditions allow particular practices of corruption to flourish? What conditions allow a diagnosis of corruption to hold for particular segments of a population? How do the practices and discourses of corruption circulate across scales, through space and over time? And what dynamics of visibility and publicity characterize this circulation (Gupta 2012; Muir 2016)?

Periods of rapid institutional transformation frequently create zones of legal, ethical, and practical ambiguity within which corrupt practices emerge and flourish (Smart 1993). Of course, the specific kinds of corrupt practices that flourish and the particular anxieties those practices elicit is a historical matter. The logics of corruption and anti-corruption are quite variable, and one could tell the political-economic history of a given locale by charting shifts in those logics (Nugent 2018; Schneider 2018). Clearly, the structural adjustments and postsocialist privatizations of the 1980s and 1990s marked one such shift, out of which emerged not only particular kinds of corruption but also the now familiar neoliberal-style emphasis on transparency and accountability metrics as anti-corruption measures. However, many of the essays here also point toward the ongoing relevance of longer-term histories: of the Cold War’s geopolitical terrain of client states (Nugent 2018; see also Corinil 1997) and the United States–led drug war’s proliferation of prohibitions and profit-making opportunities (Bocarejo 2018; Schneider 2018; see also Roitman 2005), of postcolonial developmentalist and nation-building politics (Hetherington 2018; see also Mbembe 2001), and the colonial-era appropriation and transformation of so-called traditional or local structures of authority (Smith 2018; see also Lomnitz 1995; Pierce 2016).

A second pattern has to do with locale. An unanticipated theme of many of the essays gathered here is that of the built environment, meaning not only obviously constructed edifices but also landscapes (Smith 2003) of all sorts as they are shaped by histories of human engagement (Schneider and Schneider 2003). The importance of place stems in part from the fact that what amounts to corruption is often simply rent seeking, in which access to some locally situated resource or office is monopolized illicitly. More broadly, because most forms of corruption mobilize interpersonal, intimate, and quotidian relations in the service of illicit transactions, the particularities of place are especially salient factors in determining the sorts of corrupt practices that emerge (Bocarejo 2018; Schneider 2018; Smart 2018). What is more, locale is crucial in another sense, given that specific modes of corruption often become so closely associated with a given place that they become woven into popular conceptions of local or national identity (Ansell 2018; Muir 2016; Smith 2007; Tidey 2018).

All the essays in this special issue take the nation as their primary frame of reference. However, each one points to the centrality of international and transnational processes in any accounting of corruption’s extraordinary global success as a category of popular critique. Shore (2018) provides an important analysis of the role transnational accounting firms play in turning anti-corruption into a business, with all the distortions and unintended consequences that process entails. The works of nongovernmental organizations like Transparency International, quasi-governmental organizations like the World Bank and the IMF, and institutions of international governance like the United Nations are all equally central, as several essays take pains to emphasize (Feldman 2018; Hetherington 2018; Musaraj 2018; Sampson 2010; Tidey 2018). However, the nation remains a key analytic frame because diagnostic blame for corruption lands, with few exceptions, on popular conceptions of national culture—usually a rather underspecified notion of broadly shared “values” — and national institutions—generally conceptualized as a relatively thin but constrictive set of “incentives.”

Here, clearly, is one area where there is pressing need for research. While the global diffusion of transparency and accountability imperatives through bodies such as Transparency International or the World Bank is relatively obvious, it is not clear how particular protocols, evaluation metrics, policy recommendations, and enforcement procedures develop. Much more ethnographic study within these sorts of organizations and of the relationship between these organizations and national bureaucracies is necessary in order to understand better how corruption is constituted as an object of knowledge and intervention for policy makers, legislators, and businesspeople working within and across the scales of the local, the national, and the global.

Just as pressing is the need for analysis of the dynamics of visibility and publicity that the corruption/anti-corruption complex entails. While corrupt practices are generally secretive, discourses of corruption circulate widely through face-to-face, mass-mediated, and social media channels. That circulation can prove hazardous and uncomfortable, as in the case that Smith (2018) describes, in which his published (2007) analysis of corruption in Nigeria embroiled him in an international legal controversy as well as a heated anthropological debate. However, as Musaraj (2018) shows in her discussion of an Albanian television show that exposes acts of corruption, corruption narratives can also be decidedly pleasurable for both narrator and addressee, for they envelop both parties in a frisson of shared knowledge of an illicit and covert realm (see also Hornberger 2018). Regardless of how they circulate, the consequences of these narratives are unpredictable. In some cases they foment outraged action (Sharma 2018), but in others, a frenzy of paranoid suspicion can take hold (Nugent 2018) and, in still others, a stance of confused self-doubt (Hornberger 2018) or resigned cynicism (Muir 2016). Despite anthropology’s long-
standing engagement with rumor, gossip, and mass-mediated spectacle (e.g., Brenneis 1984; Briggs 2004; Gluckman 1963; Gupta 2012), we have much to learn about how corruption scandals unfold within national and other publics, and with what effects. That analysis has the potential to make significant contributions to current anthropological debates over how modes of narration, attention, and evidentiary evaluation articulate with the political, social, and circulatory dynamics of mass publicity (see Cody 2015; Gupta 2012; Mazzarella 2017; Muir 2015; Yeh 2017).

Affective States

These dynamics point toward the need to attend to the affective dimensions of the state, as well as of other institutions that claim legitimacy through a logic of bureaucratic rationality (Weber 1978 [1922]). Affect plays a central role in statecraft, especially in producing practical commitments to state sovereignty and an experiential sense of conviviality among state subjects. Of course, such commitments and sense of conviviality do not require naive belief in the state, but can thrive, however paradoxically, in conditions of critique, suspicion, and even resistance (Arextaga 2003; Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999; Herzfeld 1997; Muir 2015; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Taussig 1997; Wedeen 1999). The essays in this issue demonstrate in compelling terms that the corruption/anti-corruption complex is key to this process of “constructing” the state (Gupta 2012; see also Appadurai 2015). In negotiating the issue of corruption in both practical and evaluative terms, people cultivate affectively laden relations to one another and to the state, producing along the way new modes of citizenship and national belonging and new horizons for collective action.

In particular, the essays in this issue explore the corruption/anti-corruption complex as the site for 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. A zeal for equitable treatment under the law can animate people in very concrete ways, as we see in several essays in this issue (Hetherington 2018; Pardo 2018; Sharma 2018). However, the proverbial Weberian problems of bureaucratic rationality seem almost inevitably to follow, as Shore (2018) and Smart (2018) explore so thoroughly. Those double binds call forth attempts to re-embed the law within a social terrain defined by the interplay of multiple evaluative schema, as is the case in the contexts that Ansell (2018) and Osburg (2018) analyze. Again and again across this collection of essays, we find people wrestling with those competing desires and, more often than not, finding themselves fairly dissatisfied with the outcome.

However dissatisfied people may be, the dynamic tension that animates these two sets of desires is itself productive of the state in a very particular way. Both acts and narratives of corruption can produce affectively charged moments of communion and ritual belonging, as Ansell (2018) shows to be the case with clientelistic politicking in northeast Brazil and as Hornberger (2018) demonstrates with respect to middle-class South Africans’ experiences with petty bribery. Far from being defined by a narrowly utilitarian logic of self-interested calculation, many, if not most, forms of corruption are characterized by remarkably rich connections of mimetic exchange and solidarity among the principal actors as well as among those positioned as their audience (Blunt 2016; Lomnitz 1995; Muir 2016; Mustafar 2018). In short, we find that corruption provides a somewhat paradoxical avenue to the sacred in Durkheim’s (1995 [1912]) sense of that which, in being set apart from the everyday, opens up onto a transcendent experience of sociality. The result is a “state effect” (Mitchell 1991) in which sovereignty is a thoroughly intimate, affective, and ambivalent affair (see Arextaga 2003).

In this sense, the corruption/anti-corruption complex offers a privileged window onto the state as an affective formation or, perhaps better yet, as a constellation of multiple, often conflictual affective dynamics, as Tidey (2018) explores in her analysis of Indonesian personalistic politics and anti-corruption measures aimed at combating those politics. For this reason, it is important to frame the heightened concern about corruption over the past several decades as more than just a side effect of neoliberalization. Rather, we should theorize that anxious concern as a key part of the process by which the state as affective formation is remade, and remade differentially for differently positioned people. Within this framing, the essays in this issue point toward three sets of questions.

The first questions concern how this process of state (trans)formation takes place. As people try to work through or around the conflicting demands and desires of the corruption/anti-corruption complex, what processes do they—usually inadvertently—set in motion? When do those processes result in the transformation of the state as affective formation? When do those processes double back on themselves and strengthen or perpetuate existing patterns?

Second, how can we periodize the history of the state in terms of these shifting affective formations? Might the corruption/anti-corruption complex offer a privileged way of charting such a history? The state that Nugent (2018) describes is thoroughly paranoid, taken over by a suspicion run amok that will be familiar to students of other Cold War contexts (see Aureli 1999; Glaeser 2004; Verdery 1996). How can we characterize the dominant affective “tone” of the state in other historical periods, such as the contemporary moment, when the triumphalist and hegemonic authority of the neoliberal state and of transnational organizations like the IMF seems to be giving way to something more muted and contestable (Streeck 2016)?

Third, how does a framing of the state as affective formation allow us to analyze concerns about corruption in spaces be-

9. Were we to follow Hume (1983 [1751]), we might characterize bureaucracy as the site where the “artificial” and “natural” virtues come into conflict in an especially heightened way, and we might approach corruption as a potential outcome of that conflict.
citizens, policy makers, and activists—have developed an interest in corruption, just as it has for so many people. More than any other topic, inequality originally spurred our interest in corruption. As we know from contexts like the one Feldman (2018) describes, nongovernmental organizations do a great deal of the work of governing in the world today. How does the state effect produced in those contexts differ from that produced in the more familiar context of the territorially sovereign nation-state? What is more, people frequently use the language of corruption to frame critiques, anxieties, and moral condemnations in decidedly nonpublic, even intimate, spaces (Muir 2016; Smith 2018; Tidey 2018). What does this diffusion of anxiety about corruption suggest regarding where we, as analysts, should find the “state” today? What can we learn by framing these intimate engagements with the corruption/anti-corruption complex as productive of a sort of state effect at the very heart of institutions such as the family (see Geschiere 2013)?

Axes of Inequality

More than any other topic, inequality originally spurred our interest in corruption, just as it has for so many people—citizens, policy makers, and activists—in places around the world. After all, although corruption and anti-corruption (and talk about them both) can produce a ritualized sense of interpersonal, even intimate, belonging, it by no means necessarily produces an egalitarian sociality.

Across the essays gathered here we see a recurring tension between the potentials of corruption and anti-corruption to mitigate and to exacerbate social inequalities. At times, engaging in corrupt acts can be the prerogative of an elite, for it can serve as a gatekeeping mechanism that ensures the ongoing power and distinction of that group, as is the case with the elite networks of businesspeople and state officials that Osburg (2018) analyzes in Chengdu, China. At other times, corruption functions as the last resort of the marginalized, insofar as it serves as a means of circumventing “the rule of law” and other anti-egalitarian barriers to access. Most of the time, corruption does both things at once, but for different people, as when corruption serves as the terrain for intra-elite competition (Nugent 2018). In such a situation, anti-corruption can bring together displaced elites and rising middle classes through the ideals of transparency and accountability. However, efforts to combat corruption can also reinforce existing social and political inequalities, as Feldman (2018) shows in her analysis of the ways that suspicions of corruption are intertwined with the humanitarian governance of Palestinian refugees. In short, corruption and anti-corruption enable new kinds of inequality to emerge and alter existing ones; their relation to inequality is not knowable in advance or in general.

Given this variability, it is imperative to disarticulate the issue of inequality along several axes, of which class or socioeconomic inequality is perhaps the most obvious. In many contexts, anti-corruption is strongly associated with the middle class and with ideals of meritocratic professionalism, as Hetherington (2018) shows in his analysis of civil service reform efforts in Paraguay (see also Ansell 2014; Muir 2016). This is particularly the case in places—like much of Latin America and Africa—where the twentieth-century consolidation of national middle classes hinged on employment opportunities in expanding state bureaucracies (Johnson 2012 [1957]; Lomnitz 1971). As a result of that history, middle-class norms in these regions tend to be strongly inflected with a civic, republican ethos, even when people find that they cannot avoid violating those norms in practice (Apter 1999; Hornberger 2018; Lomnitz 1971; Muir 2016). In other contexts with other histories of state and class formation, we find very different class dynamics. In India and China, for example, there are important anti-corruption campaigns marked by a decidedly popular or working-poor class valence (Osburg 2018; Sharma 2018).

Of course, class dynamics are often closely intertwined with distinctions of race, ethnicity, and nationality (Feldman 2018; Hornberger 2018). As we mentioned above in our discussion of corruption as a “North Atlantic universal,” perceptions of corruption can map all too easily onto longstanding racialized sociogeographic distinctions of development and modernity. These hierarchies often play out quite visibly in the work of transnational governance organizations. Artifacts like Transparency International’s (2016) Corruption Index, for example, routinely portray corruption as an endemic and “deadly” (World Bank 2016) problem plaguing countries in the Global South. However, those organizations typically examine their own corrupt practices or those of politicians in the Global North in the rare and fleeting moments of high-profile scandals (e.g., Behar 2012). Racialized distinctions can also play out in the intimate spaces of everyday life, as people in some contexts find themselves drawing on these broader discourses to produce modes of self-orientalizing critique (Gupta 1998; Muir 2016; Smith 2018; Tidey 2018). Contrarily, when people find themselves alienated from those discourses and from the political and economic centers that produce them, we can sometimes see greater scope for critique both in everyday practices and in ethical judgments (Bocarejo 2018).

A third axis of inequality has to do with gender. In most of the cases explored in this special issue, corrupt acts occur within social domains that are gendered masculine (regardless of the gendered identities of the particular individuals involved; see Osburg 2013). That this would be the case is not surprising because, as we argued above, corruption is paradigmatically a problem of the public sphere, and the public/private distinction is a thoroughly gendered one (Gal 2002). As we might expect, then, corruption’s intrusion of private interests into normatively public domains carries with it a feminizing valence. Indeed, corruption as the feminization and weakening of civic norms is a trope with a long history stretching back to Renaissance political thought and beyond, to ancient Greek thought regarding the polis (Arendt 1958; Pocock 1975).

These three axes of inequality do not by any means exhaust the relationship of corruption and anti-corruption to inequality. By articulating with other linguistic, sexual, and educational differences as well as sociogeographic differences such as the...
urban/rural divides that are salient in so many contexts (Hetherington 2018; Pandian 2009) and the unequal relationships between nation-states, corruption/anti-corruption discourses and actions have far-reaching consequences. Attending to those points of articulation is an important area for future research and suggests a number of promising questions. For example, given what we know about the importance of language ideologies in shaping social norms regarding exchange, evaluation, and representation (Keane 1997), how do linguistic inequalities affect the corruption/anti-corruption complex? How do corruption and anti-corruption reshape the lives of members of various minority populations and their possibilities for political participation, substantive rights, and social membership? And how can we as analysts better leverage an understanding of the multiple axes of inequality and difference in the service of policy initiatives that seek not merely to combat corruption per se but to promote more just and equitable futures?

Conclusions—Speaking to Anthropology and Beyond

The issue of inequality allows us to return, on surer footing, to the questions we articulated at the outset: Why has corruption become especially relevant now to anthropology and to the communities and publics that anthropologists study? What are the historical conditions that have allowed corruption to become a matter of urgent, outraged concern in so many parts of the world? And what are the possibilities and limits of that concern? By way of conclusion, we will suggest that the relationship of the corruption/anti-corruption complex to inequality is key to answering these questions.

In his history of the concept of corruption from Machiavelli through 400 years of political experimentation, Pocock (1975) shows that this varied tradition of thought has long cast corruption as the most dangerous threat to political legitimacy.10 We can see why corruption should loom so large within this and related political imaginaries if we return to an issue we mentioned earlier regarding the fundamental place of popular sovereignty within the three intertwined lineages of democratic, republican, and liberal thought. Within these traditions, legitimate rule is grounded in popular sovereignty, which in turn is predicated on a notion of equality known as “isonomia,” in which citizens have equal political rights (Arendt 1963:30; Pocock 1975:516). What constitutes equal political rights and whether they can exist absent other, more substantive rights have, of course, long been contentious matters.11 Nonetheless, irrespective of any particular theorization of isonomia, its necessarily abstract form of political subjectivity necessarily renders illegitimate the very notion of particularistic appropriation or non-universal claims. As a result, the logic of popular sovereignty—as formulated in its many liberal, democratic, and republican variations—stands in diametric opposition to corruption, which violates rights-based equality. As Pocock (1975: 208–211) argues, for Machiavelli and his varied inheritors, corruption and political inequality reinforce one another in a vicious cycle that leads inexorably to political disintegration.

Given this constellation of political intuitions regarding (in)equality that revolve around the grounding concepts of popular sovereignty and political equality, the pluri potent capacity and the recent global success of corruption as an idiom of critique become much clearer. As we have argued, corruption is an extraordinarily polyvalent judgment that allows people to condemn public behavior, especially when there is a pronounced lack of alignment between legal and ethical regimes of legitimacy. That lack of alignment certainly characterizes the social contexts of all of the essays gathered in this issue. More generally, it characterizes the aftermath of the past several decades of neoliberal globalization, which has produced profound transformations in norms and practices concerning the proper relationship between the public and the private and between the political and the economic. The transnational infrastructure and global standardization of ideas and metrics of good governance that have proliferated during this same period provide ready-to-hand tools for addressing and redressing that lack of alignment within a neoliberal framework of accountability and transparency.12 However, to reduce contemporary concerns with corruption to a mere symptom of neoliberal governance would be to ignore the potential of the corruption/anti-corruption complex to serve as one of the most malleable and powerful vehicles for the critique of both formal and substantive inequalities within a hegemonic political framework that, insofar as it is predicated on popular sovereignty, cannot escape an irresolvable tension between universal, abstract equality of rights and substantive conditions of material inequality (Ferguson 2015).

That anthropology has, at last, turned its attention to this nexus of issues says a great deal about how the discipline has

10. Teachout (2014) echoes Pocock’s argument and foregrounds the concern—even obsession—that the framers of the US Constitution had with corruption.

11. Arendt (1963:31) insists that, for the ancient Greeks, this form of equality pertained “specifically [to the] political realm, where men met one another as citizens and not as private persons.” However, as Pocock (1975:537) points out, at least from Machiavelli onward, theorists of popular sovereignty have continually struggled with that tightly circumscribed conceptualization and have frequently worked to expand understandings of equality to include other dimensions of social life, with social contract theories positing one especially robust alternative account (see, e.g., Rawls 1971:72). Noteworthy in this long history of debate over the nature of equality is that the intuition of a natural or essential equality of virtue—so central to proto-Romantic, Romantic, and certain democratic strains of thought that we mentioned earlier and that are epitomized by Montaigne (1948 [1580]), Rousseau (1992 [1755]), and Thoreau (2016 [1854])—have fallen so far from view within major currents of political debate in the contemporary moment.

12. There is a rich body of anthropological work interrogating this infrastructure, including works on audit culture, numbers and metrics, and expert knowledge (e.g., Appadurai 1993; Mitchell 2002; Musara 2015; Strathern 2000).
(in welcome ways) transformed over the past several decades into an intellectual space dedicated not to the exploration of particular geographic regions, organizational forms, or cultural domains but to the analysis of the social mediation of human life. It is this attention to rich contextual mediation that allows anthropological approaches to shed light on some of the most difficult issues pertaining to the study of corruption. Unlike normative or definitional methodologies, a broadly anthropological approach emphasizes the importance of context in a deep sense. The lack of sufficient attention to context is one major reason that so many anti-corruption measures have resulted in the consolidation of power by entrenched elites, or resulted in changes in forms of governance that make elites even less accountable than before. As the essays in this issue demonstrate, a profound understanding of social context—particular histories, relations, meanings, and cultural forms—is essential to the articulation of effective reforms. Particular policy measures that work well in one social context may not work at all in another, and decontextualized conceptions of incentives and disincentives are especially weak tools with which to combat corruption. At the very least, the anthropology of corruption shows that any analysis of the corruption/anti-corruption complex must attend, first and foremost, to the question of the interpretive communities or publics for whom corruption and anti-corruption exist as significant objects of knowledge, concern, and praxis.

The essays gathered in this issue explore in rich detail how, in interpretive communities around the world today, the corruption/anti-corruption complex is a profoundly significant way for people to grapple with fraught problems of equality and popular sovereignty. Given this problematic, we conclude with one final set of questions: Can anti-corruption efforts actually improve people’s lives, and, if so, whose lives? Is it possible to formulate anti-corruption efforts that are more successful in improving the lives of the most vulnerable and least enfranchised populations? What are the ultimate horizons of a political imaginary centered around the problem of corruption? And, perhaps most ambitiously, can those horizons point beyond the rather thin version of political equality that the legacies of democratic, republican, and liberal approaches to popular sovereignty have bequeathed us?

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Fifty Years of Mafia Corruption and Anti-mafia Reform

by Jane Schneider

Since the formation of the Mafia as a criminal organization in late nineteenth-century Sicily, anti-mafia reformers have attacked mafia corruption. If only the state could curtail transactions between mafia members and political and entrepreneurial elites; if only society could reject the intreccio—a gray zone of complicity, enhanced by mafia cultural practices, especially a tradition of hospitality. Below, I consider transformations in this dialectic over the past 50 years. In the 1960s, political leftists railed against corrupt arrangements between mafiosi and Christian Democrats, the governing party at the regional and national levels. During the “long 1980s,” as Sicily became a hub for global heroin trafficking and violence intensified among mafia factions and against the state, right and left coalesced in an anti-mafia “civil society” movement. The crisis produced an unprecedented anti-mafia law under which nearly 400 mafia members were imprisoned. Nevertheless, the prosecutors who brought the cases failed to indict nonmafio sus power holders suspected of collusion, leaving them in an “external” category. Tragically, by 1992, the Mafia had assassinated the most heroic of these prosecutors. Their successors, in part to honor their fallen colleagues, have focused on collusion. The paper ends with the difficulties that they encounter.

Fifty years of confrontation in Sicily between mafia corruption and anti-mafia reform highlight the following concerns. First, who makes an issue of corruption, and to what effect? Do they represent a political party or a social movement? Under what conditions do they produce a pervasive discourse, echoed in the mass media, in new laws, and at large? Second, what is targeted? Is it a narrow set of self-serving, quid pro quo transactions? Or is it a wider range of social relations, including kinship and friendship, gifting and socializing—relations that have no immediate payoff but are believed to risk corruptibility with time? Third, where is attention directed? At business and political elites who connive to accumulate wealth and power, or at ordinary people, engaged in the redistribution of public assets as favors to kin or friends? Finally, how does anti-corruption morality get reflected (or not) in successful prosecutions and sentences? Are prosecutors and the legal procedures that they follow perceived to be just, or is injustice an issue, and for whom?

These questions apply to the dialectic of corruption/anti-corruption generally, but they reveal a particular dynamic in the case of a criminal organization that challenges that sine qua non of the modern state, its supposed monopoly over the means and use of violence. Although Sicilians express disgust with corruzione on a daily basis, the dialectic traced below is framed as they would frame it: mafia/anti-mafia.

During the mid-1960s, when Peter Schneider and I first conducted fieldwork in a rural town of the Sicilian interior that we call Villamaura (J. Schneider and P. Schneider 1976, 1984), we encountered two forms of mafia corruption. One, openly discussed by the leftist political parties, in particular the Communist Party, was transactional. The Mafia’ mobilized votes on behalf of the governing Christian Democratic Party (DC), receiving in exchange the state’s largess and protection. The other rested on diffuse kin-like relationships of obligation and trust that mafiosi purposefully cultivated with nonmafiosi, including politicians and businessmen. The word intreccio—literally, a “plaited hairdo of tightly woven braids”—is widely used to express these entanglements. Following a brief analysis of why mafias are characteristically involved in both transactional and intreccio-like relations with state officials, I describe these forms of mafia corruption as we encountered them in 1960s Sicily.

The essay then shifts to the “long 1980s,” when the Sicilian Mafia assumed, and then lost, a pivotal role in global heroin trafficking. Moving our field site from Villamaura to Palermo, we followed an unprecedented criminal justice repression of the Mafia, together with a growing anti-mafia social movement...
(J. Schneider and P. Schneider 2003). Of special interest was a breakthrough anti-mafia law, passed in 1982 by the Italian Parliament, that constructs the Mafia as a coherent criminal organization, separated by identifiable boundaries from the rest of society. In the paper’s final section, informed by a brief visit to Sicily in the summer of 2016, I consider the enormous hurdles that contemporary prosecutors face in convicting persons external to the Mafia for complicity with it.

Mafias, an Overview

Although the label “mafia” circulates widely, it is best reserved for a specific criminal formation: fraternal sodalities whose respective local “chapters” or “families” (the Italian word is *cosche*, singular *cosca*) dominate territories in which, thanks to a reputation for violence made credible by violent acts, they “order” sectors of the economy. Corollaries include the transgenerational continuity of the respective “families”; an emphasis on respect, discipline, loyalty, and *omertà*, roughly translatable as silence before the law; a pattern of selecting new members on the basis of aptitude as well as kinship; and cultural practices that contribute to solidarity and underscore an exclusive (“man of honor”) identity—for example, a charter myth, initiation rites, evocative nicknames, and expansive conviviality. Because they are engaged in illegal activities, mafias also prepare for the possible arrest and imprisonment of some of their members, setting aside funds, managed by leaders, to support the families of incarcerated colleagues and cover their lawyers’ fees (see Paoli 2003).

Two theorists of mafias, Diego Gambetta and Federico Varese, focus on organizations that consolidated themselves before the turn of the twentieth century in Italy, Japan, and the United States, somewhat later in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and—with qualifications—in 1990s Russia. Rapid capitalist development fostered by new political regimes created considerable disorder in each of these situations. In Sicily, for example, banditry, animal rustling, and kidnapping for ransom worsened after the 1860 unification of Italy, as the new state imposed both a military draft and the further commoditization of feudal and ecclesiastical estates. There, and in the other instances, uprooted populations entered cities, incubating gangsterism and urban crime. New businesses in economic sectors that were relatively easy to enter faced, in addition, extreme demographic pressure. Amid all the mayhem, mafiosi presented themselves as self-anointed vigilantes and problem solvers, collecting or extorting a fee for their services from beleaguered business and land owners. Members of mafia groups also engaged in smuggling enterprises, but this illegal activity initially took second place to territorially grounded extortion and racketeering (Gambetta 1993; Varese 2001, 2011; see also Chu 2000; Chubb 1996; Hill 2006; Reuter 1987).

Gambetta and Varese characterize the states in which mafias formed as “dysfunctional,” “absent,” or “absorbed with other priorities” and hence vulnerable to being corrupted by mafiosi. But Richard Samuels’s (2003) book, *Machiavelli’s Children; Lead-
finance industrial and commercial development. Mafiosi turned the offices that administered these new resources into employment preserves for their many clients. They also helped organize the cooperatives that purchased the government-financed harvesters, threshers, and combines. Acquiring trucks and equipment, they won contracts to haul materials for the construction of new roads, dams, and schools. And they delivered votes—75,000 to 100,000 "friendly" votes in the province of Palermo alone—primarily to Christian Democrats who, in the words of an eventual justice collaborator, became "representatives of the Mafia" (quoted in Arlacchi 1993:182–184). The favor was returned not only in the form of contracts and access to government jobs but also in the criminal justice sector. When convictions were obtained, they were often overturned, or the sentences were reduced on appeal.

By the mid-1960s, no place in Sicily exhibited the consequences of DC-mafia entanglements more profoundly than the regional capital, Palermo, whose several cosche thrived as the city expanded. Cosche in the Palermo hinterland, known as the Conca d’Oro (Golden Shell), also flourished. Historically dedicated to commercially oriented citrus groves and orchards, this area now experienced urban sprawl. Mafia bosses, whether of the city or the orchards, brokered relationships between public officials and construction entrepreneurs or, acquiring trucks and construction materials, themselves became entrepreneurs. Contractors and subcontractors indebted to mafiosi obligingly employed their clients; mafiosi, in turn, were able to deliver more votes (della Porta and Vannucci 1994; Lupo 1993:189; Santino and La Fiura 1990:366–391, 455–463).

From the mid-1950s through the 1970s, two young DC politicians—Vito Ciancimino, close to the powerful cosca in his hometown of Corleone, deep in the interior of Sicily, and Salvo Lima, son of a Palermo mafioso, although not himself a "made member"—together controlled the mayorality and the Public Works Commission of the Palermo city government. Lupo estimates that, under their administration, mafia-allied building contractors came to hold 80% of the construction licenses even though most of them were technically unqualified (Lupo 1993:175).2 By 1968, Lima had allied with a national DC leader, Giulio Andreotti, who, in four years, would become prime minister—a post that he occupied almost continuously until 1992. Lima further arranged that the concession to collect taxes in Sicily be granted to two friends of his administration, the prosperous mafioso cousins Nino and Ignazio Salvo, at a fee three times the national average (Stille 1995:55).

In addition to their involvement in real estate and construction, the mafiosi of Palermo and its hinterland gained control over wholesale markets for fish, meat, and produce. They collected, or extorted, a regular tribute—a pizzo, or "beak-full"—on businesses in these markets and throughout the city (ostensibly a "fee" for protection against theft, unpaid debt, unfair competition, and other business setbacks). And they invested in smuggling both American cigarettes, to evade the Italian tobacco tax, and drugs for the American market. Before the war, smugglers hid morphine from northern Italian and German pharmaceutical companies in crates of citrus, canned sardines, and other products desired by Sicilian immigrants in the United States. After the war, Gaetano Badalamente, descendant mafioso of Cinisi, a town just west of Palermo, convinced government planners to build the regional airport nearby—employing, of course, his construction materials and trucks. Badalamente had several relatives in the midwestern United States, including a brother in Detroit, and would become an important heroin trafficker—helped, in part, by compliant airline passengers. The year 1963 saw the first of two mafia "wars" occasioned by tension over drugs—in this case, a vicious argument over who to blame for a wayward shipment of heroin entrusted to a waiter on a transatlantic steamer from Egypt.3

Villamaura in the Mid-1960s

Peter Schneider and I lived in Villamaura, a rural town of 7,500, from October 1965 to June 1967. Surrounded by large former feudal estates devoted to animal husbandry and the cultivation of hard wheat, the town had participated in the struggle for land reform. Nicknamed piccola Mosca (little Moscow), it had a Communist mayor and vice-mayor (which was unusual, although not unique, for Sicily). Villamaura also had a mafia cosca, numbering, we guessed, about 10, most of whom were descendants of or close to local massarioti—administrators of the large estates who owned or managed hundreds of sheep and cattle, who held sway with bandits, and who were steeped in the traditions of animal rustling and marketing stolen meat. Three were owners of successful local butcher shops.

Early in our Villamaura residence, we were taken to a reforestation project on a nearby mountainside, shown rows of holes in the ground, and regaled with the story of a DC-supported contractor who had pocketed money for reforestation but planted not a single tree. We also observed how the local DC kept its voters in line. At election time, party hustlers (galoppini) rounded up voters. One such hustler, a mafioso, told us he could spot defectors by the looks on their faces after voting. The system of proportional representation provided him (and us) a better check: most voters were trusted with the party-assigned ordering of preferences, but voters whose loyalty was uncertain were given the candidates’ names

2. In the words of political scientist Judith Chubb, the DC government in Palermo from the 1950s through the 1970s "cannot be adequately understood without consideration of the critical role played by key real estate and construction interests in the consolidation of its power" (1982:128).

3. Reciprocal homicides escalated to include the use of car bombs, one of which famously massacred seven police and Carabinieri officers as they inspected a suspicious car.
in an idiosyncratic order. As each ballot was tallied out loud in a public place, one could identify who failed to vote as they were told. Coincident with our exposure to corrupt arrangements between the DC (as well as the Republican Party) and local mafiosi, we stumbled, almost by accident, on a few strands of the intreccio. A leading Villamaura mafioso, one of the butchers, sliced up and gave us a pair of bulls’ testicles with instructions on how to cook them. He then so enjoyed Peter’s joke about the aphrodisiac effect of coglioni that he invited us for Christmas dinner. The resulting friendship with him and his family paved the way for the events described below.

Peter happened to be present when our new friend and the other mafioso butchers of Villamaura entered into a truce with a meat wholesaler from Solera (a pseudonym), a rural town not far away. A year before the peace was negotiated, the two parties had quarreled over the Villamaura butchers’ refusal to place an order for meat that, according to the Solera wholesalers, they were obliged to buy under an earlier agreement. Instrumental in arranging the truce was a third group from a small city, here called Palazzoverde, with a population of approximately 30,000. Its leader, also a butcher, had brought the litigants together in the back room of one of the Villamaura butcher shops; also present was a fourth party, the merchant who had supplied Villamaura’s meat during the quarrel. His small and isolated village, Montebello (a pseudonym), is a half-hour drive from Villamaura.

The truce had going for it the prestige of its instigators, who came from a commercially developed urban center and were well connected to the political machine of the regional Christian Democrats. The presence of the Montebello merchant also augured well. This man was a dilettante in the commerce of meat and had felt uneasy in his role as “temporary competitor” of the more powerful wholesaler from Solera. Yet no one present felt convinced that the handshakes, hugs, and round of toasts could guarantee the pact, leading the Palazzoverde peacemakers to propose a tavoliddu, dialect for feast. Over the next 3 months, five banquets materialized in four locations, and Peter, present at the back-room peacemaking, was invited to all. The first banquet unfolded in a rustic country house outside of Palazzoverde, where the peacemaking hosts, assisted by local friends, prepared a fish stew, roast meat with vegetables, fruits, and dessert, accompanied by abundant wine. No women were present at this or subsequent banquets; men prepared the splendid dishes themselves. Leading the host group was Don Totò, who was nicknamed “Vescovo” (Bishop) because of his unrealized ambition to become a priest, his unmarried status, and his priest-like residence with an unmarried sister. Closely connected to the diocese of Palazzoverde, Vescovo was an acolyte of leading DC politicians. He was joined by a cousin, Mimo, who was an accountant, and Pippo, reputed to be of gentry background, who was not regularly employed.

Vescovo, Mimo, and Pippo sat at the center of a U-shaped table, immediately surrounded by friends from Palazzoverde. One wing of the U accommodated the wholesale meat merchant, his sons, and a distinguished “elder statesman” mafioso from a town near their home in Solera. Facing them on the other wing were the three butchers of Villamaura and their friends. The merchant from Montebello and his support group (consisting of a cheese merchant, two cattle traders, and a building contractor) shared the middle of the table with the Palazzoverde peacemakers. Vescovo, as master of ceremonies, toasted the elder statesmen present, the value of friends, the greater importance of friendship than money, and the meal as the occasion for friends to be together.

After dinner, he, Mimo, and Pippo disappeared into a back room to emerge draped in white tablecloths and other paraphernalia evoking priestly vestments while ringing a bell. With Pippo holding a beach umbrella over his head and Vescovo assisting, Mimo sang a mass. The liturgy evoked a traditional Latin service but was sung in dialect and was a ribald commentary on the possibly questionable behavior of wives and daughters back home. Instead of “amen” at the end of each verse, the “congregation” was led to chant minchcia (prick). Gales of laughter broke the tension that had been building during the verse, after which, accompanied by more wine, some of the bon vivants from Palazzoverde performed erotic parodies of women strippers.

At each subsequent feast, both meal and mass (now nicknamed the messa minchìa) became more elaborate. On the second occasion, the host butchers of Villamaura prepared octopus, goat stew, and roast lamb, which they served at a mountainside restaurant overlooking the town. At Montebello, 3 weeks later, the setting was a country house belonging to a utility company employee, a friend of the interim meat merchant. Here, two hoses with attached spigots were suspended over the table, each descending from a wine barrel on the second floor. Just as the last chorus of the mass was fading, the company was startled by a burst of fireworks outside, reminiscent of a religious festival.

By this banquet, the roster of guests had grown to over 50, including a jazz drummer and three football players from Palermo, invited by the Solera wholesaler’s sons. Others were notables of the respective towns. In the case of Villamaura, the (Communist) mayor and vice-mayor, the veterinarian, and two priests so enjoyed themselves at the second and third banquets that they joined in hosting a fourth, held in the same country restaurant as the second. The fireworks specialist who was commissioned to embellish this occasion failed to show, but he redeemed himself with a brilliant display at the last banquet, hosted by the Solera wholesaler and his friends at a resort area restaurant on the southern coast. Over 80 people attended this one, among them the fire chief and veterinarian of the nearby port city. As someone quipped, “only the police were missing.” Here, the “entertainment committee”—still Pippo, Mimo, and Vescovo—outdid itself, Pippo having brought along a pink satin nightgown and a hooded black

4. Names, nicknames, and place names are fictitious in this account.
satin cape. Using large Sicilian oranges to create the appearance of breasts, he spent the latter part of the evening cavorting in drag.

Like other revelers, the mafiosi of Villamaura engaged in multiple conversations over the course of the banquets. That the Palazzoverde architects of the peace were close to the regional Christian Democrats (as were the invited priests) suggests that channels to higher levels of power were opened or reinforced. Perhaps conversations with state-licensed veterinarians would tempt them to look the other way when they suspected a butcher of receiving stolen protein. Finally, what should we make of the fact that the Communist mayor of Villamaura was such an enthusiast of the banquets that he joined in hosting one of them? Only a short while later, he was able to secure a plum job for his son in the office of the mafia-allied tax collectors.

Such examples of reciprocity are only one legacy of the banquets which, through generous hospitality and raucous entertainment, created a sort of “hothouse morality” that encouraged participants to think of themselves as special—as honorable friends, entitled to upend everyday conventions and laws. Nor were these tavaliddi unique. Mafiosi of the rural towns were famous for orchestrating fabulous hunting parties. Their wives and daughters joined in producing great schitticchia (another dialect word for feast) to celebrate baptisms and the annual sheep shearing. As with the banquets described above, the guest lists included leading figures in politics, the clergy, the business world, and the professions—even police officers. The sheep shearing that we attended in 1966 was capped by a schitticchia so drenched in wine that a Carabinieri officer, invited by our mafioso friend, threw up on the table.

Hospitality on this scale transcended rural Sicily. The depositions of justice collaborators taken in the 1980s tell us that, from the 1950s through the 1970s, a luxury hotel near Palermo, the Zagarella, served as a weekend playground for its owner, Nino Salvo, one of the mafioso cousins who held Sicily’s tax collection franchise. According to collaborator testimony, Salvo used the hotel to entertain powerful politicians; a regular weekend poker companion was the mayor of Palermo, Salvo Lima (Calabrò 1984; Calderone, in Arlacchi 1993:175). In 1995, the Zagarella became a centerpiece in the dramatic trial of the former prime minister, Andreotti, who was accused of having colluded with the Mafia. A photograph taken in 1979 showed him there, together with Nino Salvo and Lima.6

Hospitality, especially when it includes transgressive good times, is generative not only of instrumental “deals” but also of trusting, affective relations going forward. Mafia members attempting to solve a problem or gain a benefit ask themselves “cu avenu ddai?”—whom do we “have” in that office or institution? Like ties of kinship, friendships grounded in revelry foster an open-ended credit system, available when needs arise. One is reminded of John Osburg’s description of “corrupt transactions and relationships” between gray-economy businessmen and government officials in Chengdu, China (Osburg 2018). The former invest “emotional labor” in “banqueting, drinking, gift exchange, and other forms of shared, gendered leisure”; the latter are thereby “embedded.” A justice collaborator from Sicily put it this way: the mafioso is like a spider as he “constructs his web of friends, acquaintances, obligations” (Calderone, in Arlacchi 1993:20). From this derives the intreccio—that organic interweaving of mafia and not mafia.

The Long 1980s

Until the breakup of the French connection in the early 1970s, heroin exported to the US market was refined in Marseilles. Afterward, Marseilles chemists traveled to Sicily to impart the skill of refining Asian opium. By the end of the decade, Sicilians produced between 4 and 5 tons of pure heroin each year, worth $600 million in annual profits and meeting 30% of US demand (Arlacchi 1986:207; Paoli 2003:145). Mafiosi scrambled to invest in clandestine refineries, protect contraband shipments, and carve out channels for money laundering. New kinds of ties had to be forged—for example, with secret service operatives and international bankers. Conflict, treachery, and paranoia increased apace, as did the Mafia’s arsenals, in which Kalashnikovs and bomb-making equipment displaced the old sawed-off shotgun, the lupara. Anticipating trouble, the heads of several cosche in Palermo province sought to modulate conflict through a coordinating commission, referred to as the “Capola.” Rather than resolve conflicts, however, the body became another locus of dispute.

Soon a “mafia war,” far more serious than the one of 1963, pitted interior cosche, centered in Corleone, against mafiosi in Palermo and its surrounds. Historically marginal to drug trafficking, the former suspected the latter, advantaged as they were by their access to ships carrying orchard produce, to the Palermo airport, and to a network of distributors in America known as the “Pizza Connection,” of excluding them from the richest deals as if they were “country hicks” (Lodato 1999:49–50). Maneuvering to raise their own investment capital, the Corleone bosses, led by Salvatore (Totò) Riina, audaciously kidnapped construction impresarios, some of whom were close to Lima, pursuing a bandit-like strategy that violated mafia rules. As prophylaxis against reprisals, they also infiltrated the most powerful Palermo cosche, subverting them from within. By 1983, over 500 homicides and disappearances had transpired. In Lupò’s words, the Corleone-centered faction had on its agenda “cutting out the Sicilian-American axis and taking over the narcotics profits for itself” (Lupò 1993:212–

5. A year hence, our mafioso friend was, nevertheless, so accused. He “got to the judge” who was handling his case through Vescovo and Vescovo’s DC-connected allies (see P. Schneider 2000).

6. The manager of the hotel at the time testified that Salvo had ordered the “best possible” buffet and personally conducted Andreotti on a tour of the finest rooms (Arlacchi 1995:105; Buongiorno 1984).

7. One was Nino Salvo’s brother-in-law.
214; see also Chinnici and Santino 1989; Paoli 2003:136–140).
In the short run, it succeeded, so much so that the Corleonesi became known as the *vincenti* (winners) and the Palermo and orchard groups as the *perdenti* (losers).

Of crucial importance, the late 1970s marked a shift in the mafia-state relation. Previously, the murder of a police officer, magistrate, politician, or journalist—sure to bring heat on mafiosi everywhere—had to be unanimously approved by commission members (Paoli 2003:132–136).8 But the commission, disbanded and then reinstated after the first mafia “war,” was taken over in 1977–1978 by Corleonesi affiliates who “expelled” the Cinisi boss, Badalamente.9 In 1979, without warning the commission members who were out of the loop, this more aggressive faction assassinated a police captain who was investigating heroin laboratories. The next victim, in 1980, was Piersanti Mattarella, president of the Region of Sicily, who was threatening to become a reformer. A judge and a Carabinieri captain soon joined the roster of “excellent cadavers.”

In this increasingly violent context, a small group of Sicilian magistrates, already involved in drug-related investigations, formed a “pool” to reinforce one another as they followed the money and prepared indictments. Led by senior magistrates Rocco Chinnici and Gaetano Costa and, from the younger generation, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, pool members had to be wary not only of vengeful mafiosi but also of treacherous colleagues entangled in the intreccio. The Palermo *Procura*, or Palace of Justice, acquired a nickname: *Palazzo dei Veleni*, Palace of Poisons. On April 30, 1982, the Mafia assassinated the Sicilian Communist leader and national deputy, Pio La Torre, who had been fighting in the Italian Parliament for legislation that would render membership in the Mafia illegal. The next day, Carabinieri General Carlo Alberto dalla Chiesa, a northern Italian who knew Sicily well, was assigned to Palermo to coordinate anti-mafia efforts for the province. Public outrage over his assassination on September 3, 1982, moved the Parliament to pass the strategically important Rognoni-La Torre Law, which criminalized membership in “associations of a mafia type,” granted investigators greater access to bank records, and allowed the state to sequester and ultimately confiscate the illegally gained property of convicted mafiosi (see Jamieson 2000:28–29). The law conceptualized “associations of a mafia type” as coherent and bounded, not as fomenters of messy entanglements—a view that complicated subsequent jurisprudence.

Two weeks after Chinnici and Falcone issued arrest warrants for the dalla Chiesa murder, a car bomb killed Chinnici and his guards, signaling a diabolical confrontation between the Mafia and its prosecutors. The latter, helped by the US Justice Department’s witness protection program and Pizza Connection prosecutions, began to cultivate justice collaborators from among the losing mafia faction, who were tempted to turn state’s evidence by sentiments of revenge and fear. The move was highly controversial; when the press labeled the collaborators “pentiti,” it was intended to be ironic, as no one believed they were actually repentant (Dino 2006; J. Schneider and P. Schneider 2003:132–135). The famous pentito, Tomasso Buscetta, who accused the Corleonesi of corrupting the Mafia, helped the prosecutor Falcone construct a sociology of mafia organization, which, like the Rognoni-La Torre Law, emphasized coherence and boundaries. Despite the assassinations of two additional police investigators in 1985, the Falcone-led “pool” successfully indicted 475 mafiosi, most of whom were sentenced to prison in the extraordinary “Maxi trial” of 1986–1987. So dramatic was this outcome that, in the 1987 elections, cosche leaders went out of their way to mobilize votes for the Socialist Party, sending a warning to Lima and Andreotti. In 1989, a bomb was found near Falcone’s secluded beach house—an attempt on his life that could only have matured with help from the “Palace of Poisons.” Involved in a dispute over the leadership of that “Palace,” Falcone left for Rome to direct a newly created office of penal affairs in the Ministry of Justice. On January 31, 1992, Italy’s Supreme Court, the *Corte di Cassazione*, upheld the vast majority of Maxi trial convictions. Because of the Mafia’s entwined relationship with the Andreotti current of the DC, this outcome was unexpected. Many of the defendants in the trial had ties with Salvo Lima, Andreotti’s point person in Sicily. Everyone knew, moreover, that the Cassazione traditionally assigned mafia cases to the section of the court headed by a Sicilian judge and Andreotti’s point person in Rome. In retaliation, the Mafia assassinated Lima.

And then, on May 23, Magistrate Falcone; his wife, also a magistrate; and three members of their police escort were massacred on the highway from the airport to Palermo as their cars passed over a culvert full of explosives. Stunning the world again, on July 19, Falcone’s close friend, colleague, and successor Paolo Borsellino, together with his police bodyguards, was killed by another explosion. Two weeks after the Falcone massacre, new regulations went into effect, only to be strengthened after Borsellino’s demise. Besides enlarging the definition of prosecuitable crimes and establishing additional protections for collaborators, they created *carcere duro* (“hard prison”) conditions for mafiosi. Only immediate kin could visit a prisoner and then only once a month. Mail was censored, and outgoing telephone calls were forbidden. Falling under Article 41-bis of the Prison Administration Act, the new regulations had been designed by Falcone to impede both territorial and trafficking operations. They were further amplified by interdicting con-
tacts among mafia prisoners, some of whom were dispersed to distant prisons (see Jamieson 2000:41–48).

Reacting ferociously, the Corleone faction bombed cultural and artistic targets in Rome and northern Italy in 1993. A bomb planted near the Uffizi Galleries in Florence not only damaged paintings and structures but also killed an entire family. Later, it was learned that other attacks had been thwarted or not carried out. The terrorist strategy, some believe, was to force the state’s hand in a negotiated retreat from 41-bis and other repressive measures; I return to this hypothesis below.

Palermo, 1987–1999

We lived in Palermo for seven summers between 1987 and 1999 and for 6 months in 1996, partly in the city’s middle-class north, partly in Albergheria, which was a popular neighborhood in the historic center. These sojourns overlapped with the dramatic events just sketched and enabled us to study a Palermo-centered citizens’ social movement—the Movimento Anti-Mafia—that coalesced after the dalla Chiesa assassination, both to support the judicial effort and to challenge the intreccio. Through demonstrations and programmatic interventions, activists initiated a “Palermo Primavera” (Palermo Spring) that lasted through the conclusion of the Maxi trial.

They also stirred a backlash among “Sicilianists” and others who were offended by so much change (Santino 2009; J. Schneider and P. Schneider 2003). In 1987, acclaimed Sicilian novelist Leonardo Sciascia crystallized the growing anti-mafia sentiment in a review of a book on fascism in Sicily that was published in a leading national newspaper. There was an analogy, Sciascia declared, between Cesare Mori, the late-1920s prefect assigned by Mussolini to “clean up the Mafia,” and the contemporary “anti-mafia professionals” who, by simplifying the problem, then using turncoat testimony to establish guilt through association, put democracy at risk. Most unsettling, Sciascia accused the magistrate Borsellino of unseemly careerism because he had recently been promoted out of the line of seniority.

Movement activists were shocked. Sciascia was known as a man of the left who believed, as he once wrote, that the Mafia “defended the property of the latifondo against peasant hunger” (Sciascia 1961:165). His novels of the 1960s (e.g., Sciascia 1960, 1964, 1966) had courageously explored the intreccio at a time when it was fashionable to ignore it, further amplifying his reformist credentials. Among his most memorable characters are politically powerful villains who, although not mafiosi, socialize with mafiosi. They need only to have the reputation of being close to the Mafia to have a convenient murder or menace of violence materialize. It turns out that, in Sciascia’s eyes, the pain of the Mafia for Sicilians was owed to the vastness of the intreccio; unwinding it without trampling on civil liberties required an approach far more complex, nuanced, and gradual than the Maxi’s defenders had allowed.

Sciascia died in 1989, leaving these defenders unable to forgive what they considered his betrayal. To many, he had stooped to mystification, as if the Mafia were so diffuse, so embedded in Sicilian culture, that curtailing it was a pipe dream. Not until the crisis years of 1992–1993 would activism be reinvigorated again, while even today, some believe that Sciascia’s demoralizing “bombshell” was partly responsible for the terror of those years (see P. Schneider and J. Schneider 1998).

Our book Reversible Destiny: Mafia, Antimafia, and the Struggle for Palermo (2003) contrasts anti-mafia activism of the 1980s and 1990s with its forerunner in the 1960s, noting how, instead of being grounded in peasant struggles and left politics, it gathered adherents who were urban and generally well-educated and was more inclusive of women than in the past. Adherents were also politically ecumenical. Reform-minded Christian Democrats joined with enthusiasm, while Communist participants expressed embarrassment over compatriots who, like the mayor of Villaluma, were entangled with mafiosi. Indeed, anger was directed not only at Lima and the Christian Democrats but also at the Communist construction unions for what movement activists decried as a horrible legacy of mafia corruption: a ruined built environment—the “cemementification” of Palermo and its beautiful Conca D’Oro.

Seeking to overcome the opposed political identities of the Cold War years took cultural work; movement leaders adopted the language of “civil society” and “the rule of law” to bury what they called the “tribalism” of their ideological differences. Prosecutors, some of whom we interviewed, were correspondingly reluctant to be identified with any political party. As a youth, Borsellino had been close to the neofascist MSI (Movimento Sociale Italiano), yet he worked intensively with Falcone, who, although also known for political caution, came from left of center. In 1989, Falcone famously prosecuted a justice collaborator for falsely asserting that Salvo Lima, the corrupt DC mayor of Palermo, had ordered the 1980 murder of Piersanti Mattarella, president of the Sicilian Region.11 The winding down of the Cold War in the late 1980s advanced the apolitical framing of reform, as did a northern Italian judicial investigation into political corruption that began in 1990. Known as the “Clean Hands” (Mani Puliti) operation, it exposed DC, Socialist, and other politicians for receiving or extorting bribes.

10. Further demonstrating the state’s resolve, 7,000 troops were sent to Sicily, given police powers, and deployed to keep watch over sensitive offices, residences, and arteries. The Italian Parliament reinvigorated its Antimafia Commission and created a new institution under the Ministry of the Interior, the Direzione Investigativa Antimafia, staffed and funded to coordinate the sectors of the police, Carabinieri, and Finance Guard that specialized in organized crime.

11. Falcone’s decision to challenge this accusation against Lima upset Palermo’s then mayor, Leoluca Orlando, who was also a reform Christian Democrat who had been close to Mattarella, and who charged, in what became a notorious polemic, that Falcone possessed incriminating evidence in his desk drawer but refused to act upon it.
and kickbacks, especially from construction entrepreneurs. Antonio Di Pietro, the leading investigative Clean Hands magistrate, fervently spoke the language of law and civil society.

During a conference in 1988, Falcone expressed skepticism about prosecuting what many reformers labeled the “third level” of the Mafia—the level of “externals” above the so-called Cupola and “above suspicion.” Nor did the first justice collaborators testify to the existence of a higher level of complicity. The Maxi convictions reflected this hesitation. Only Vito Ciancimino (who had alternated the Palermo mayoralty with Lima) constituted a decisive “third level” defendant—and this was because he had been apprehended laundering money through a Montreal bank. The superwealthy Salvo cousins were also convicted, but they were mafiosi (see J. Schneider and P. Schneider 2003:132–144). And yet suspicions of corrupt transactions grew darker, with activists pondering whether “Propaganda Due,” a “deviated” branch of freemasonry, had cultivated mafiosi for its (failed) 1970 neofascist coup attempt against the Italian state and subsequent “strategy of tension.” Secret service operatives, some of them involved in NATO’s “Stay Behind” project, which stockpiled weapons in case of a Soviet invasion, were also hypothesized to collude with mafiosi, as were money-laundering bankers like Michele Sindona (Nicastro 1993; J. Schneider and P. Schneider 2003:72–80). Before the jurisprudence of the Rognoni-La Torre Law could be enlarged to include “concorso esterno in associazione mafiosa”—external complicity in mafia associations—Falcone was killed.

Mafia/Anti-Mafia Dialectic Today

In 1993, shortly after the supportive Turin magistrate Giancarlo Caselli arrived in Palermo to head the Procura, two Palermo prosecutors, Roberto Scarpinato and Guido Lo Forte, both reeling from the massacres of Falcone and Borsellino, indicted Andreotti, whom they charged with “having contributed—more than occasionally—to . . . Cosa Nostra, in particular in relation to judicial processes against members of the organization” (quoted in Centro Siciliano di Documentazione Giuseppe Impastato and Comitato dei Lenzuoli di Palermo 1996:17; see also Caselli, Montanaro, and Ruotolo 1995). The prosecutors relied on justice collaborators who, in the 1990s, included several Corleonesi. Testimony covered the prime minister’s off-the-record Sicilian trips, among them a trip for a hunting party. One pentito described encounters with a leading member of the losing faction in the 1970s; another claimed to have witnessed Andreotti being kissed on both cheeks by Totò Riina, the Corleonese boss, in 1987. Alas, the second collaborator misbehaved and was subsequently rearrested, damaging his credibility. The trial, which ended in 1999 after more than 200 sessions, declared that the prime minister had committed collusive acts before 1982, but it acquitted him because the statute of limitations had expired. Regarding collusion after that date, he was found “not guilty for lack of sufficient proof.” The Appeals Court and Supreme Court upheld both decisions.13

Highly controversial, the Andreotti trial provided fodder to those who, like Sciascia, questioned the legitimacy of an aggressive magistracy. Silvio Berlusconi, prime minister since 1994, was an especially vocal critic along with Forza Italia, the political party he created after the Clean Hands scandal had decimated the DC and the Socialist Party. Berlusconi accused many magistrates, Caselli among them, of promoting a Communist agenda, calling them “togate rose” (red togas). As is well known, he himself would be prosecuted for a variety of economic and moral crimes. Under his influence, the Italian Parliament, in 1997, curtailed judicial power; new regulations allowed prisoners more contact with their families and set limits on the use of collaborator testimony.14

Berlusconi notwithstanding, the Palermo Procura continued to indict powerful persons who, although not mafia members, were accused of “concorso esterno.” Marcello Dell’Utri, successfully prosecuted in 2004, constitutes a foremost example. Born in Palermo in 1941, Dell’Utri attended university in Milan, where he befriended Berlusconi and, later residing in that city, connected himself to northern Italian banks, construction firms, and Fininvest, the media empire of his friend. A cofounder of Berlusconi’s Forza Italia Party, he served as a deputy, then senator, on the Forza Italia list. Rumors flew regarding his mediation on behalf of Vittorio Mangano, a mafioso from Sicily whom Berlusconi hired as stableman and security guard at his estate near Milan. In 1996, a pentito, Salvatore Cancemi, accused Dell’Utri of being in contact with

12. In a separate action in Perugia, Andreotti was also tried, then absolved, for having ordered the mafia-executed 1979 murder of a journalist.

13. There were a few small victories for the prosecutors. The appeals court declared that Andreotti lied when he denied knowing the Salvo cousins. Besides the abovementioned photograph taken at the Zagarella in 1979, which showed Andreotti with Nino Salvo, a witness testified that Andreotti had given Salvo’s daughter a silver bowl as a wedding present. Andreotti’s relations with Salvo Lima and Vito Ciancimino as well as with one of the key money-laundering bankers, Michele Sindona, were also confirmed, as were the political gains he derived from these relations. Nevertheless, Scarpinato and Lo Forte, who had sought a sentence of 15 years, were criticized for having overreached. Historian Lupo concludes, in his analysis of the Andreotti prosecution, that the trial reinforced people’s sense that their former head of state had lacked the moral courage to extricate himself from the intreccio. Whether he had huddled with mafiosi in a conspiratorial “pact” to impede that state’s investigations was impossible to prove (Lupo 1996).

14. Should a collaborator decide to change or retract a statement, it would be disallowed as evidence in court—a modification that the Supreme Court upheld and even applied retroactively. Subsequently, three mafioso collaborators, apparently in exchange for the offer of a “pardon” from certain mafia leaders and out of fear that their immediate families were in danger, decided to abandon their agreement to testify. Anti-mafia magistrates blame the new legislation for giving mafiosi the power to offer “amnesty” to collaborators whose testimony they want to change.
Corleonesi boss Riina over a plan to soften 41-bis. Subsequent collaborators elaborated: Dell’Utri had mediated an agreement with the Mafia that enabled Forza Italia to sweep elections in Sicily, displacing the vanquished DC. The Palermo Court of Appeals upheld the 2004 conviction and, after a long delay, the Supreme Court confirmed it in 2014. According to the prosecutors, Dell’Utri had provided a “concrete, voluntary, conscious, specific and precious contribution” to the economic and political goals of both mafia factions—the “losers” and the Corleonesi. The higher courts did, however, reduce the sentence to 7 years from the requested 11 years.15

Most spectacularly, in 2013, the Palermo Procura indicted an entire cabal: four (already imprisoned) Corleonesi, including Riina; three high officials of the Carabinieri; Massimo Ciancimino, the son of Vito; an ex-DC minister of the interior; and Marcello dell’Utri. In a separate trial, in 2015, another ex-minister was absolved, subject to appeal. All allegedly participated in a “trattativa” (negotiated pact) in 1992–1993, hence the name of the case: Trattativa Stato-Mafia.16 There are two specific accusations: “concorso esterno in associazione mafiosa” and “violenza o minaccia al corpo politico dello stato.” The first accuses the “political” defendants of being in the “ambit of” and contributing to the Mafia; the second accuses the cabal as a whole of assault on the body politic. According to the pact, the state would soften the provisions of Article 41-bis in exchange for the Corleonesi terminating their massacres and bombings.

Justice collaborator depositions point to a meeting of the Riina faction in the fall of 1991 at which it was “decided” to undertake terrorist actions against the state. Following the Falcone murder and the imposition of 41-bis, Riina allegedly drew up a “papello” (list of demands) for rendering prison less onerous in exchange for peace. In January 1993, the Carabinieri finally arrested Riina, a long-time fugitive, but failed to search the house where he had been hiding before it was mysteriously emptied and repainted (see Jamieson 2000:233). There followed a growing split among the Corleonesi, one group committed to continuing the acts of terror, the other group favoring retreat. Bernardo Provenzano, second to Riina and also a long-time fugitive, is said to have bridged the division; according to a collaborator’s testimony, he advocated continuing the violence, but only against northern Italian targets.

Tentative evidence for the hypothesized “pact” includes the following. In late 1993, 334 imprisoned mafiosi were released from “hard” conditions; by 1994, the violence had dissipated. In 1997, under Berlusconi, the “hardest” terms were alleviated, as we saw. There are also recorded telephone conversations and subpoenaed correspondence regarding changes to 41-bis. Depositions taken from Massimo Ciancimino, son of Vito, shed light on his father’s mediational role, on the one hand with Riina and Provenzano—all three had deep roots in Corleone—and on the other hand with high Carabinieri officials to whom he allegedly passed Riina’s papello. Borsellino’s widow and his younger brother, Salvatore, have relayed the confidences that the magistrate shared with them about persons in power that he could not trust. Unfortunately, however, his agenda (notebook), bound in red leather, disappeared with his briefcase shortly after his assassination.

In the fall of 2014, prosecutors subpoenaed the former president of Italy, Giorgio Napolitano, requesting that he revisit the years 1992–1993, when, as speaker of the chamber of deputies, he was privy to how his colleagues understood the mayhem. Some, he said, saw it as an “ultimatum” to alter the terms of 41-bis; to others, it was an attempt to destabilize the government, as if a coup were imminent.17 Also telling are several 1992–1993 personnel decisions in key institutions—the ROS (Raggruppamento Operativo Speciale), a section of the Carabinieri created in 1990 to concentrate on organized crime; the national prison administration; and the Ministries of Interior and Justice. Resignations, removals, and new appointments hint at an agenda to replace incorruptible officials with amenable substitutes. Additional evidence could be the emergence of death threats against a leading prosecutor, Nino Di Matteo, who, in addition to receiving messages from the imprisoned Riina, discovered an altar in his house, set up by unknown persons, replete with flowers and candles. That the house was ostensibly protected by the secret services made the intrusion seem especially ominous.

To a few Palermo prosecutors and anti-mafia activists, the Trattativa Stato-Mafia was indeed a coup d’état. Their logic, based on the justice collaborator Cancemi’s testimony, already introduced (to no effect) in the earlier Dell’Utri trial, is that the Mafia, having killed Salvo Lima over the Supreme Court’s failure to reverse the Maxi trial convictions, was on the lookout for new protectors. Alas, the Clean Hands scandal had destroyed the major postwar parties, including the Socialists, with whom mafiosi had flirted in 1987. Forza Italia, known to be hostile to the magistracy, seemed especially attractive. By bombing targets in northern Italy, the Mafia could

15. Dell’Utri was arrested in Beirut, where he had fled and, extradited, is now serving time in an Italian jail. Another indicted eminence, Bruno Contra—“a third-level” figure “above suspicion” who belonged to the secret services—took his case to the European Court of Human Rights, winning a settlement.


17. To the prosecutors’ disappointment, Napolitano received permission from the Constitutional Court to destroy a 2012 letter regarding the case, sent to him by his recently deceased legal advisor, Loris D’Ambrosio. Because D’Ambrosio had arranged for Falcone to come to Rome in 1991 and had worked with him closely in the Ministry of Justice, it was believed that the letter must have been revealing. One prosecutor claimed to be “cuckolded” by its destruction.
destabilize the entire nation, so much so that this party would appear to be a national savior, enhancing its vote-getting potential. The go-between for this hypothesized scenario was none other than Dell’Utri—the Sicilian personage in Berlusconi’s orbit. Over and above the substantial electoral base that the Mafia created for Forza Italia in Sicily in 1994, where the party won 30.4% of the vote, compared to a national average of 21% (see J. Schneider and P. Schneider 2003:295–296), it is argued that the agreement sealed Berlusconi’s regional and national ascendency.

A prominent advocate for this version of the Trattativa is Antonio Ingroia, who is a lawyer, writer, magistrate, and social movement activist. Born in Palermo, Ingroia received a law degree from that city’s university in 1986 with a prize-winning thesis on “mafia association” (distinct from mafia membership) in penal law. As a magistrate, he worked briefly with Falcone and closely with Borsellino, pursuing cases of extortion, international trafficking, and collusive local administrators. Following the killings of Falcone and Borsellino, which were personally devastating for him, he worked with passion in the Palermo Procura until 2012, preparing indictments against “externals” such as Dell’Utri and assembling testimony for the Trattativa Stato-Mafia case.

Ingroia’s model of mafia corruption was not born in 1992–1993; his 1986 thesis suggests that he was already drawn to the theme of Italy’s “mysteries.” His ideas, however, matured with the crisis of those years, most certainly with the tragic massacres of his colleagues and friends. In 2012, the same year that the Trattativa trial opened, he published a book (Ingroia 2012) whose title, Io So (I Know), evokes Pier Paolo Pasolini’s famous (1974) list of claims to know who were the occult potentates—neofascists, neonazis, CIA agents, mafiosi, coup plotters, deviated masons—behind many otherwise inexplicable events of the high Cold War. The purpose of Io So is to peel back layers of obfuscation and expose the cop that, Ingroia insists, empowered Berlusconi. (Forza Italia operatives are suing him for defamation.)

To many, Ingroia’s passion suits a politician more than it suits a magistrate; only the former would characterize Forza Italia as a party “born to respect the interests of Cosa Nostra” (quoted in Fiandaca and Lupo 2014:10–12). Two months after the Trattativa case began, the young prosecutor asked for a leave of absence to undertake a United Nations–sponsored drug-trafficking investigation in Guatemala. He then left Guatemala, amid much criticism, to head a new political party, Civil Revolution (Rivoluzione Civile). Had the party succeeded in the 2013 elections, he would have become prime minister. In fact, its very poor showing caused it to dissolve, with Ingroia then leading a spin-off group, Azione Civile—Civil Action—a “pure civic” movement.18

Azione Civile takes progressive stands on many issues, from labor rights to climate change. But the issue that most agitates followers is corruption. Dedicated to raising citizens’ consciousness about bad government (malgoverno), and about collusion between the Mafia and “occult powers,” the movement is supported by such national personages as, for example, Caselli and Pio La Torre’s son. Palermo’s anti-mafia mayor, LeoLuca Orlando, is a follower, as is Antonio di Pietro, the mover and shaker of Clean Hands. Relatives of the victims of the Florence bombing are also on board.19 In 2009, Borsellino’s brother, Salvatore, founded a group called “Red Agendas” (Agende Rosse), named for the magistrate’s missing notebook; it too is allied with Ingroia’s Azione Civile.

The ongoing Trattativa case is widely criticized as a long shot. Lupo, who also questioned the prosecutorial wisdom of accusing Andreotti of conspiring with the Mafia (see Lupo 1996), has coauthored, with legal scholar Giovanni Fiandaca, a book titled Non ha vinto la Mafia—“The Mafia Has Not Won.” In it, the authors express their skepticism that mafiosi succeeded in extorting the state to modify its penal law. According to their analysis, serious narcotics trafficking transformed the historic mafia-state relation.20 Formerly, both institutions had oscillated toward collaboration and spoken the same “language of order.” Once this pattern was broken, each mafia-instigated massacre triggered new waves of anti-mafia mobilization and vice-versa. That there was immense suffering from the unfolding dialectic needs to be acknowledged and redressed, perhaps through something like a “truth and reconciliation” process; but prosecuting “third-level” conspirators asks too much of the justice collaborators and the law (Fiandaca and Lupo 2014).

During our visit to Sicily in the summer of 2016, we met several friends—intellectuals, journalists, magistrates, business owners, and others—who had participated in the anti-mafia mobilizations of the 1980s and 1990s. To some, Lupo’s and Fiandaca’s book evoked the Sciascia bombshell of the late 1980s, which had raised a flag about magistrates acquiring too much power and trampling civil liberties. According to this perspective, there are bound to be innocent persons ensnared in anti-mafia round-ups, the more so as prosecutors take aim at “externals.” Yet, to dwell on the innocent few at the expense of the guilty many is to forget what happened after Sciascia died—the massacres and bombings of 1992–1993. Di Matteo, the foremost Trattativa prosecutor after Ingroia’s departure, expresses his outrage this way: “the Mafia and corruption are two sides of a coin, but while mafiosi are adequately punished, those who walk arm-in-arm with them are guaranteed substantial impunity by the political system” (paraphrased from Palazzolo 2016).

18. His having been a candidate in a national election made it impossible for him to continue in the magistracy.

19. As early as 1998, they pursued an inconclusive anti-mafia suit in the Tribune of Florence and have now, with Ingroia as their lawyer, joined the Palermo trattativa case as “interested civilians.”

20. Diana Bocarejo (2018) analyzes the changes that occurred in the remote parts of Honduras and Colombia when an illegal, although not illicit, economy expanded to include paramilitary protected coca refining and trafficking.
And yet, not even Sciascia’s most ardent critics appear to trust Ingroia. Several activists perceived him as craving power; one associated him with an emergent anti-mafia fringe exemplified by a radio talk show host who attempted to raise money by falsely claiming that his family and dogs were threatened by mafiosi. According to a magistrate we interviewed, Ingroia’s self-serving political ambition had poisoned what could have been a viable Trattativa case. Still others questioned whether the case was ever viable, citing two flaws: the indictment of too many “externals” without real proof that they had contributed to mafia crimes, and overreliance on the revelations of Massimo Ciancimino—a collaborator who “tells the prosecutors what they want to hear.” According to one of our friends, Massimo’s father, Vito, himself a notorious embroiderer of the truth, habitually introduced Massimo as “my cretino son.” In other words, except for having accused the martyred hero Borsellino of unseemly ambition, Sciascia had a point.

Italo Pardo (2018) reviews how a series of well-meaning reforms in Italy have, in their implementation, threatened the country’s “democratic contract.” One spectacular example is the Clean Hands investigations of the early 1990s. Because the operation was able to convict, in courts of law, only a fraction of the politicians and businessmen whose reputations it impugned, Pardo refers to it as a “witch-hunt.” Anti-mafia activists and sympathizers, when asked about the Trattativa, did not use this locution, but some expressed concern about the same dynamic. Everyone we talked to, moreover, was convinced that the Sicilian magistracy must itself be riven by doubt. Alongi, Rubbettino, and others but also on a nontransactional yet potentially more corrosive basis. The ethnographic description of banqueting traditions in Sicily, by Gupta, Akh. 1995. Blurred boundaries: the discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state. American Ethnologist 22:375–402.

Conclusion

The past half-century’s dialectic between mafia corruption and anti-mafia reform addresses the concerns posed at the beginning of this essay. In the 1960s, agitation about mafia corruption occurred primarily in left-wing political circles, whereas by the 1980s, a civil society social movement had formed—only to succumb to activist disillusionment and internal division in more recent years. Throughout this period, reformers have fastened not only on quid pro quo transactions between mafiosi and others but also on a nontransactional yet potentially more corrupting “gray area”—the so-called intreccio. As we saw in the ethnographic description of banqueting traditions in Sicily, mafiosi quite consciously cultivate nontransactional relationships, including with local, regional, and national institutional elites. Neither the intreccio nor its implications were acknowledged in the Rognoni-La Torre Law, which criminalized membership in the Mafia as if it were a discrete organization, leaving the complicity of “externals” for later.

This fundamental ambivalence, plus reliance on potentially questionable justice collaborators, has so far limited anti-mafia criminal justice to one transformative accomplishment: the repression of drug trafficking and the calming of its associated violence. Although achieving near-heroic status during the “long 1980s,” anti-mafia prosecutors were reluctant to pursue the “third level.” Martyred even so, they were then succeeded by colleagues who, in part to honor their memory, are compelled to embrace the call, only to be rebuffed by fellow reformers.

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Corruption Now and Then: Managing Threats to the Nation in Twentieth-Century Peru

by David Nugent

In this paper, I draw on Peruvian government responses circa 1950 to the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana, an underground political party, to identify the features of a distinctive, mid-twentieth-century corruption/anti-corruption complex. I also show how this earlier complex differs from its contemporary counterpart. In the neoliberal present, concerns with corruption emerge in a context in which the public domain finds itself at risk from an alarming expansion of private appropriating powers. National governments play a key role in reconfiguring the public/private divide, and thus they are directly implicated in corrupt activities. Around 1950, however, it was just the opposite: the private domain was regarded as being under dire threat from an emergent global public. Furthermore, national governments were at the forefront of efforts to prevent the spread of the corrupt globalizing forces that were said to be gathering at the nation’s borders. To draw out the distinctiveness of the mid-century corruption/anti-corruption complex, I focus on the distinctive shadow worlds imagined into being around 1950 as government officials sought to protect the nation from corruption. I also explore the peculiar state optic that emerged at mid-century, which mediated government efforts to see the shadow worlds that officials regarded as such a profound danger.

Corruption is usefully understood as a category of transgression that blurs the boundaries between domains that should remain distinct. As Muir and Gupta (2018) note in the introduction to this supplement, corruption does not refer to any determinate set of practices or relations. Nor does it have any clear or unambiguous referent. Rather, corruption is a context-specific judgment about the legitimacy of specific practices and relations. Emerging as it does in contexts of transgression, corruption may be regarded as an attempt to tighten boundaries that have become dangerously relaxed—and in the process, to clarify distinctions between the legitimate and the illegitimate. To borrow the evocative phrasing used by the editors, “corruption . . . nam[es] that which must be expelled in order to assure legitimacy” (Muir and Gupta 2018:S6). To quote them further, “the specter of corruption haunts modern politics . . . animating repetitive, incomplete attempts to cleanse and legitimate the political-economic order” (S5).

The contemporary era of neoliberal globalization has generated corruption concerns that focus on a particular boundary—that between the public/political and the private/economic. In a broader context in which liberal, isonomia-based understandings of popular sovereignty provide the basis of legitimacy in virtually all nation-states (see Muir and Gupta 2018), the sweeping institutional and cultural changes associated with the most recent phase of globalization have called that boundary into question. In so doing, they have created a disjuncture between the legal and the ethical. All around the world, elites find themselves in a position to engage in formally legal (?) but ethically suspect activities that are highly particularistic in nature—activities that allow them to work along the blurred boundary between public and private to appropriate public goods for private ends. Furthermore, elites have been able to do so on a massive scale.

The national publics seeking to make sense of this assault on their well-being view these transgressions as occurring in a murky, dangerous space where the public/political and the private/economic merge. In this domain, people fear, decisions of the most alarming, ominous kind are being made, and they are being made out of sight, as it were. Indeed, the weakening of the boundary between public and private and the colonization of the former by the latter have generated widespread fears about corruption. This situation has also resulted in impassioned cries for transparency—for light to be shone on the shadowy world in which illicit and quasi-licit appropriations are taking place, so that all may see what is transpiring and who is conspiring within it.

In the pages that follow, I argue that, as important as these processes are, they represent one among several manifestations of the corruption/anti-corruption complex (see Muir and Gupta 2018). Threats to popular sovereignty in its liberal, isonomia-based guise are indeed the common ground that makes these different forms of corruption/anti-corruption variations on a single theme. But liberal popular sovereignty has faced other, earlier challenges that were just as serious as, if not more serious.

David Nugent is Professor in the Department of Anthropology of Emory University (1557 Dickey Drive, Atlanta, Georgia 30329, USA [david.nugent@emory.edu]). This paper was submitted 1 IV 17, accepted 1 XI 17, and electronically published 19 II 18.

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than, the contemporary threat. These challenges focused concern on very different boundaries and generated period-specific views of how to cleanse the political order and also what to cleanse it of. It is one such threat—in the mid-twentieth century—that is the focus of this paper.

As in the present situation, the source of the threat to be discussed in this paper was global, but the globalizing forces in question were very different from those of today. So too was the domain that was regarded as threatened by those global forces. In the contemporary world, debates about corruption play out within particular nation-states, as the publics of each struggle to understand and contain the dangers represented by the expansion of private appropriating powers (whether national or transnational). Governments are centrally involved in—indeed, are indispensable to—the process of reconfiguring the public/private divide. As a result, they are often directly implicated in the corrupt practices that are of such concern to the general populace. The point, however, is that, in the current era, conversations about corruption are largely transnational. They pit subgroups within the same nation against one another, and often against their own government, in a debate about the proper nature of national sovereignty.

If today’s debates about corruption reflect divisions within nations and implicate or delegitimize governments for their role in helping private appropriating powers expand at the expense of public domains, in the case discussed below, it was just the opposite. It was not the domain of the public that was seen as being at risk from the private but rather the domain of the private—the particularistic, the accumulating—that was regarded as being under dire threat from an alarming expansion of an emergent global public. Rather than acrimonious debates about corruption raging between subgroups within the same national community, each nation-state as a whole sought to contain the corrupt globalizing forces that were gathering at the nation’s borders (literal and figurative). Indeed, the national politics of the era sought to police those boundaries with great care. Rather than national governments being implicated in corrupt practices, government was at the forefront of efforts to prevent the spread of those practices.

As is true today, mid-twentieth-century processes of globalization generated widespread fears of corruption. Furthermore, corruption named what had to be expelled in order to enshrine legitimate sovereignty. Then as now, the threat of corruption was considered a constant—something that required “repetitive, incomplete attempts to cleanse the political order” (see Muir and Gupta 2018). What differed between the two eras was, on the one hand, what was named as the corrupting forces that had to be expelled. What differed as well was what these corrupting forces had to be expelled from.

In mid-twentieth-century Peru, as in much of the world, it was the domain of private accumulation that was regarded as being under threat from the era’s forces of globalization. National communities had committed themselves to a form of popular sovereignty that stressed the inviolability of that right, so threats to private accumulation were tantamount to threats to the nation as a whole. It was thus the national community—understood as made up of liberal-rights-bearing citizens—that was regarded as endangered. And it was national governments—the champions of liberal popular sovereignty—that sought to protect the national community from the looming global threat. Because it was the literal and figurative boundary of the nation that was regarded as being compromised, the shadow worlds projected by the mid-twentieth-century corruption/anti-corruption complex were assumed to be located along that boundary. The techniques developed to cleanse the political order of corrupting influences similarly focused on that domain. As I show below, neither those shadow worlds nor the purging techniques associated with them were those of the present.

What were the globalizing forces that were of such grave concern to the national governments of the era? As of 1917, I suggest, a novel threat appeared on the world stage to the many national polities that had committed themselves to isonomia-based forms of popular rule. That danger was the plethora of political movements advocating radical social transformation that emerged all around the globe in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. These movements—one of which will be discussed below—were regarded to be at least as threatening as the contemporary expansion of private economic power into the domain of the public. The threat was (and is!) perceived to be so serious for a variety of reasons. First, it was transnational in scope, whereas the mechanisms available for monitoring and containing it were strictly national. Second, this threat appeared to be expanding globally at a very alarming rate—and to be “ahead” of efforts to contain it. Third, the threat in question was carefully organized, and it was organized to be a threat. Fourth, its activities were highly secretive, making them extremely difficult to observe or detect.

Fifth, the era’s radical political movements explicitly critiqued liberal rule as a false form of popular sovereignty. They also proposed their own alternative form, which they claimed was more genuine—a form that overcame the limitations of the liberal, isonomia-based form. Finally, the era’s radical movements elicited deep, passionate commitments from huge numbers of people all around the globe—commitments that elites regarded as dangerously irrational. Those attracted to the era’s radical alternatives were drawn to these movements’ promises of economic equality and economic rights—the very rights that were denied them under conditions of liberal, popular rule.

In the pages that follow, I consider official reactions to one such movement—a radical, underground political party called the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (APRA), which enjoyed (from the Peruvian government’s perspective) alarming levels of support from poor and marginalized groups. The national government, which referred to party members as “APRA-Communists,” was deeply concerned about the corrupting influence of the Party of the People (as APRA called itself)—and had outlawed the party because it was said to be an “international organization.” The politics of corruption to which the government subjected APRA thus acted as a form of anti-
politics (see Muir and Gupta 2018), which sought to naturalize national imperatives that should have been (but clearly were not) beyond dispute.¹

In other words, official concerns with APRA’s corruption sought to render as taken for granted a highly specific form of the nation, democracy and popular sovereignty—to represent this one form as universal and transhistorical (i.e., as a “North Atlantic universal”; see Muir and Gupta 2018). In so doing, this earlier variant of the corruption/anti-corruption complex generated a lack of alignment between spheres, although not the contemporary disjuncture between the legal and the ethical. Instead, the disjuncture of that earlier period was between the formal boundaries of the national community (which, by definition, included all liberal-rights-bearing citizens) and its suspected boundaries—a difference that reflected elite fears that a great many of their compatriots could not be trusted.

Who did elites suspect of not being trustworthy? As is the case with contemporary neoliberal corruption, in this earlier period of globalization, corruption was regarded as an ever-present threat—a specter that haunted politics. In the case at hand, however, the specter was not that of private economic power threatening the public. It was, rather, a specter famously named as such by Karl Marx in 1848—the specter of “communism” (Marx and Engels 1969 [1848]:14). Because the specter of radical political transformation loomed so large in twentieth-century Peru, or so elites believed, they viewed the nation as always already corrupt and therefore in need of ongoing but inevitably incomplete attempts to cleanse and purify.²

Indeed, as was true in much of the world, in the eyes of Peruvian elites, the “masses” that made up the bulk of the national population were inherently suspect. So deep was this elite fear of the general populace that it was reflected in the very structure of the liberal, isonomia-based polity—in the separation of formal, political rights from economic realities (a separation that APRA promised to do away with). It was by means of this specific construction of popular rule that economic inequality was left outside the realm of what could be discussed in political debate. Nor was this a perception that was limited to Peru. As a number of scholars have noted, from their very inception in the North Atlantic, liberal, representative forms of government—which enshrine isonomia-based understandings of popular sovereignty—were designed consciously and explicitly to protect private wealth from the threat of public expropriation.³

As noted above, the mid-twentieth-century expression of the corruption/anti-corruption complex generated its own shadow worlds and its own distinctive optic with which to gaze upon those worlds. This optic had features that are not fully captured by the notion of “transparency.” Rather, the official state optic went through stages. It initially turned a “blind eye” to virtually everyone and everything (when the authorities felt the nation was safe from corruption). Subsequently, as official fears of corruption began to emerge, the state optic sharpened and tried to bring suspect groups into focus. As time passed, however, the optic became ever sharper, and it focused on an ever-widening range of people, because it had never been clear to begin with who could and could not be trusted. Eventually, the gaze widened until it included everyone.

The mid-twentieth-century variant of the corruption/anti-corruption complex differed from its contemporary equivalent in another way. As noted in the introduction, at present, corruption is often regarded as an index of advancing or retreating modernity (Muir and Gupta 2018). In some contexts, corruption is equated with backwardness and is seen as delaying the forward march of the modern. In other contexts, corruption claims harken back to an earlier, golden age of the modern and invoke a process of moral decay that is said to have taken place since that golden age. In both cases, however, modernity acts as a kind of anchor—as the unquestioned point of reference from which to judge developments in the many elsewhere that are seen as imperfect replicas of the original.

In the case at hand, however, corruption is framed by a very different spatial and temporal imaginary—one that calls into question modernity’s status as a transhistorical universal. Rather than modernity having been delayed or decayed, it is regarded as besieged. Furthermore, it is besieged by a “re-volutionary” force that arrived on the scene well after liberal popular sovereignty became institutionalized in national polities all around the world. In this sense, APRA questioned the inevitability of the modern and sought to replace it with a more genuine form of popular sovereignty. Indeed, APRA attempted (as did similar movements) to establish itself as a new transhistorical reference point—one that would displace liberal modernity. The APRA/radical threat might therefore be thought of as “after-modern.”

In my discussion, I draw upon government responses to APRA in mid-twentieth-century Peru to explore the dynamics of the era’s corruption/anti-corruption complex. I am particularly interested in the shadow worlds imagined into being by government officials as they sought to shore up national boundaries that they regarded as dangerously compromised by the forces of international Aprista corruption. I am equally concerned with the techniques that officials developed to purge the political order of corruption. I also discuss the peculiar state optic that emerged during this era—which mediated government efforts to see the shadow worlds that officials considered such a profound danger. The point of my analysis is not to determine whether APRA was “really” a threat. It is rather to understand the official state logic that informed such judgments. That is, my purpose is to grasp the culture of corruption (cf., Gupta 1995) that emerged in a specific context—one in which what was named as the corrupting forces that had to

¹. There is some irony in the fact that the Odría regime regarded the Apristas as Communists, because the Apristas and Communists hated one other.
². See in particular the work of Ellen Meiksins Wood (1994).
³. See in particular the work of Zamoyski (2015).
be expelled and what these corrupting forces had to be expelled from were very different than they are today.

A Crisis of Rule

Epistemology asks how knowledge can be uncovered and secured. Anti-epistemology asks how knowledge can be covered and obscured. Classification of state secrets, the anti-epistemology par excellence, is the art of non-transmission. (Galison 2004:237)

Around 1950, the military government of Peru, led by General Odria, undertook a project of massive proportions. Mobilizing the collective resources of the entire state apparatus, the regime mounted a campaign of vicious persecution against APRA. In the Chachapoyas region, the campaign failed, precipitating a crisis of rule. Officials came to believe that they were incapable of carrying out the most basic of government functions. As officials came to question their own ability to rule, they attributed to the Apristas a subterranean party apparatus with miraculous, subversive powers. The authorities could not actually see the underground state to which they attributed such corrupting influence. They were certain it was there. But because APRA was hidden from view, the authorities were left to imagine the contours of their invisible enemy.

Government officials came to feel deeply threatened by APRA. They also came to suspect that the subversives were closing in around them. To protect themselves, officials resorted to extreme measures. They abandoned the outer domain of the state to the party, and they inscribed a new inner frontier between state and subversive. They did so by encrypting the state. In a desperate attempt to prevent the prying eyes of APRA from penetrating into the inner sanctum of rule, a select group of officials took to communicating in secret code. When even this stratagem failed, officials concluded that no one was to be trusted—that everyone was an Aprista.4

A striking feature of the crisis of 1950 is the deep paranoia that informed government action. Indeed, so extreme was the response to APRA that it is difficult to avoid concluding that official fears of Aprista corruption were an exceptional state—a radical departure from the everyday. In the pages that follow, I seize upon the antipolitics implicit in this view of the everyday to explore the dynamics of the era’s corruption/anti-corruption complex. Official constructions of what was corrupting and what was not, I suggest, are not to be taken at face value. The government was not a neutral, disinterested observer of corruption. Rather, it was an active participant in the era’s corruption/anti-corruption complex—one dedicated to using government power to protect private accumulation from public expropriation. Official judgments about what was corrupting are therefore best treated as normalizing claims rather than as simple facts. Or rather, they are usefully regarded as normalizing claims masquerading as simple facts.

To view corruption through the eyes of the state is to be complicit in its antipolitics. Indeed, the gaze of the state obscured the operation of the corruption/anti-corruption complex in crucial ways. It did so in part through an inversion of the normal and the exceptional. As was true in much of the world (see Muir and Gupta 2018), official constructions of the normal and the everyday in Peru were based on the principles of liberal rule. Although one would never know this from government discourse, only a tiny fraction of the populace actually enjoyed these rights. Instead of applying to everyone, liberal rights applied to virtually no one. Even so, they were depicted as if they applied to everyone. This meant that threats to the power and position of a small group of privileged individuals were recast as threats to the entire nation.

The inversion of the normal and the exceptional was only one way that the gaze of the state obscured the operation of the corruption/anti-corruption complex. Having conjured into existence a fictive national community of rights-bearing citizens, officials went on to imagine into being an entire landscape of danger, inhabited by forces said to be a dire threat to that (nonexistent) community. Prominent among these dangers were the forces of international APRA-Communism, which completely dominated the state’s (paranoid) field of vision. It was these forces, officials asserted, that were seeking to penetrate and corrupt the nation.

These forces, however, were as illusory as the national community they were said to endanger. It was not an international movement of subversives, gathered at the boundaries of the national community, who threatened the well-being of a rights-bearing citizenry. Rather, the danger to the populace came from the very actors who claimed to be protecting the (liberal) nation from the forces of international subversion. The threat was internal, not external. It came from Peru’s most privileged social elements, who had long been involved in the systematic violation of the rights of “the masses.” Indeed, the majority of the population was subject to violent and coercive conditions as a way of life.

In other words, conditions that were said to be the antithesis of legitimate political community (violence and coercion) were actually constitutive of political community. And groups that were said to be protecting the general populace were threatening it. A major dilemma was therefore how to purge (cf., Muir 2016) the nation of contradictions said not to exist. The strategy adopted in Peru was one of “displacement.”5 The authorities took deep social divisions that extended through the entire national community and recast them as a spatial divide between the national community and the world beyond its borders. In other words, officials constructed an arbitrary boundary between inside and outside, the normal and excep-

4. These developments are discussed in more detail in my unpublished manuscript The Encrypted State: Discipline, Dissent and Democracy in the Northern Peruvian Andes.

5. Displacement was a strategy employed by many national governments during this era.
tional, and displaced to the outside corrupting conditions that actually characterized inside and outside alike.6

Since the very notion of a normal, healthy inside (a national citizenry enjoying liberal rights) was a projection of an imagined state rather than a description of an actual one, and since inside and outside were in many ways indistinguishable, the entire construction was both delusional and unstable. Indeed, inside and outside were constantly threatening to collapse into one another. As a result, a crucial component of rule consisted of monitoring the (artificial) boundary between inside and outside—to hold at bay irrational forces said to represent a dire threat to the nation. These corrupting threats, however, were anything but irrational. Nor were they external. Rather, they were always already present as an ongoing, inevitable part of the constitution of the normal.

The arbitrary distinction between the normal and the exceptional, inside and outside, could only be maintained by mechanisms that systematically suppressed or misrepresented entire domains of experience. These mechanisms had much in common with those involved in the creation of state secrets. As Galison (2004:237) writes, the “classification [of state secrets] . . . is the art of non-transmission.” It is also, he argues, an anti-epistemology. “Epistemology,” he suggests, “asks how knowledge can be uncovered and secured.” Anti-epistemology, on the other hand, “asks how knowledge can be covered and obscured.” The classification of state secrets, however, differs in important ways from the everyday processes involved in the production of the normal and the exceptional. In the former, a battery of forms of scientific knowledge and expertise as well as sophisticated technologies of surveillance and regulation are consciously brought to bear on the problem of nontransmission.

In the production of the everyday, however, the opposite was the case. The mechanisms that interfered with the recognition of proscribed dimensions of experience and that maintained the difference between inside and outside could not be consciously articulated or designed. Only in circumstances that officials declared as exceptional—only when the state acknowledged openly that it was under threat—could such mechanisms be consciously designed and openly articulated.

This raises the question of what such corruption-denying mechanisms might have been during periods deemed ordinary and mundane. It is this topic—which might be thought of as “the anti-epistemology of the everyday”—that forms the substance of this paper. What is suggested by the existence of such everyday processes of concealment, however, is that even seemingly ordinary periods are usefully understood as “states of security”—even if this cannot be unacknowledged by the individuals involved in enforcing them.

In the next section, I explore the mechanisms that are central to concealing corruption during periods represented as ordinary as well as during periods deemed extraordinary. I suggest that official representations of such influences tend to follow a standardized script, in which what is knowable is refracted through a lens or filter of a very specific sort. It is officially endorsed understandings of the ordinariness of liberal popular sovereignty, I suggest, that act as the prism through which groups and activities that are deemed to be corrupting come to be seen and understood.

It is not difficult to understand why officially endorsed understandings of popular sovereignty play such a crucial role in structuring what may be acknowledged about potentially corrupting classes of people. Gathering information about such groups and confirming their suspect nature are integral to state formation—to the unending conversations regimes have with the populations they would administer about the legitimacy of rule. A characteristic feature of these conversations is their inversion of the prescriptive and the descriptive. Governing regimes are compelled to present highly interested claims about how national life should be lived (e.g., according to the principles of liberal popular sovereignty) as if they were neutral, disinterested descriptions of how it is lived. If such regimes are to transform “should” into “is,” they must be able to identify, monitor, and when necessary eliminate deviations from the norm thus defined. As noted above, during the middle decades of the twentieth century, that norm was based on isonomia-based understandings of popular sovereignty. Any and all deviations from that norm were regarded as threats to it.

It is thus their implicit challenge to official notions of the normal that makes such groups and activities relevant to the forces of order. This means that the latter tend to see these groups in very specific terms—and in ways that vary according to how and how far they appear to deviate from the norm. It also means that much of what such groups do and are is beyond state interest or recognition—that the official gaze remains blind to anything that raises no questions about the arbitrariness of the everyday.

Standard Deviations

In the pages that follow, I draw upon ethnographic materials from the Peruvian Andes to explore regularities in official representations of groups deemed dangerous and corrupting. The focus of my analysis is the above-mentioned proscribed political party called APRA. This organization troubled virtually every aspect of the normative order promoted by the government. Even so, the party enjoyed broad support from much of the populace.7

I use the term “standard deviations” to capture the regularities in the process by which the authorities organized their

6. For a fascinating and related discussion of how a politics of suspicion is transformed discursively into a calculus of objective need, see Feldman (2018).
7. APRA planned to nationalize land, mining, and industry (Haya de la Torre 1927); form workers’ cooperatives in these sectors; abolish the Congress; and establish a participatory democracy in which representatives of the cooperatives would decide national policy. Such policies were a direct affront to the laissez-faire, export-oriented policies upon which the national political economy was based (see Thorp and Bertram 1978). The claims and counterclaims surrounding APRA and officials’ paranoia about the movement had a significant transnational dimension. Indeed, the
perceptions of the party. Official representations of APRA as a corrupting force alternated between three standard forms. What characterized official views of the party as a first-order standard deviation was denial. During the 25 years (1930–1955) that are my focus, APRA remained largely hidden, underground. Although officials possessed clear evidence that the party was a serious threat, as long as the party was content to remain invisible, the government chose to minimize or ignore that threat. In other words, as a first-order standard deviation, the forces of order considered APRA unworthy of notice.

The government’s delusional insistence on minimizing the party’s influence led to a second standardized response to the deviation that was APRA. When it became clear that the party was surreptitiously seeking to climb out of the shadows, the authorities responded with a strategy of containment. The goal here was not so much to know the party as to monitor and control it—to ensure that APRA’s corruption did not continue to spread. In other words, how APRA came to be known and understood as a second-order standard deviation was a function of official concerns with maintaining the boundary between the normal and the exceptional (see Nugent 2010).

But officials also employed a third standardized script to represent and understand APRA. During periods of crisis—when the barriers erected to contain the party were overrun—the authorities became deeply paranoid about APRA. They indulged in greatly exaggerated fears about the dangers posed by the party. They were also possessed of a burning desire to resolve their fears—to gather the intelligence necessary to convert anxiety into control. During times of crisis, officials became convinced of the relevance of wholly new kinds of knowledge about the party. Rather than attempt to prevent the spread of the party’s corrupting influence, they did everything in their power to expose party activity in every detail. They sought to break through the wall of secrecy behind which APRA concealed itself, to make the party visible, transparent, and knowable. Their inability to do so, however, had alarming implications, for it suggested that a great many people did not embrace government definitions of the normal and the everyday. It also implied that much of the population had been corrupted and was not to be trusted.

The authorities reached this conclusion as they came to regard APRA as a third-order standard deviation. It was not difficult to understand how a small group of committed fanatics could survive underground as long as the forces of order let them be. But the Apristas’ ability to thrive in the face of an all-out campaign to eliminate them was inexplicable. In such circumstances, government officials came to believe, the subversives would need extensive support from groups that claimed to be loyal to the government. As the boundary blurred between inside and outside, the forces of order sought to bring it back into focus. They did so by applying various litmus tests to assess the loyalty of these groups. Motivated as they were by paranoid fear, however, officials came to distrust the very tests they devised. Ultimately, they came to believe that everyone was an Aprista.

In this paper, I focus on the third-order standard deviation—paranoia, when the authorities became obsessed with breaking through APRA’s wall of secrecy. The event that precipitated the government’s obsession with the party was a failed coup attempt in October of 1948, in which radical elements of APRA had allied with disaffected groups in the armed forces to seize control of the government. The coup was especially unsettling to the forces of order because of the context in which it occurred. During the previous three years, the party had been allowed to operate legally and had formed part of a coalition government. During the period of its legality, APRA had purported to have set aside its revolutionary goals and had promised to respect the rules of liberal democracy.

Waging War on Corruption

On October 13, 1948, contingents of Peru’s national police (the Guardia Civil) descended upon the homes of residents of Chapoypas, capital of the department of Amazonas. The police arrived in groups of three or four, knocked at the door, and demanded that the individual they sought accompany them to the Prefecture. By the next day, 13 people had been arrested and were being held in jail. All were high-ranking members of APRA.

At about 1 a.m. the next morning (October 14), the Chief of Police, Major Comeca, arrived at the jail. To soften the prisoners up before interrogating them, Comeca employed a form of torture known as the tina. The prisoners were awoken and submerged in a large tank (or tina) of ice-cold water, with their hands tied behind their backs and the water level maintained just at their mouths. A lattice framework made of bamboo was then placed over the top of the tank so that the prisoners could barely lift their heads above water level.

The Apristas were kept in the tank for several hours. One by one, they were removed and taken to an adjoining room where Comeca interrogated them. Elderly informants who lived through this ordeal still recall his threats: “If you do not give us what we want we will send you to [the jungle prison colony of] Pomará. We are told that you have the [APRA] archive. You must give [it] to us.”

Comeca bullied each man for about half an hour before returning him to the tank. His objective was to obtain the party archive. As he questioned the APRA leaders, they gave him the same response. It had been impossible to maintain an archive
due to the intense persecution the party had endured. After several days of torture, the prisoners were released.10

The arrests in Chachapoyas followed a failed coup attempt hatched on October 3, hundreds of miles away at a naval base in the port city of Callao, near Lima. The instigators were a small group of militant Apristas and junior military officers who had been “corrupted” by APRA. The military command viewed the coup attempt with great alarm, because it revealed that they had been unable to check the spread of party influence—and thus that their strategy of containment toward APRA (as a second-order standard deviation) had failed.

The president of Peru, José Luis Bustamante, viewed the coup with equal concern, because it showed APRA to be quite treacherous. It had been Bustamante who had allowed the party to climb out of the shadows. APRA gained its legality in 1945 only because it agreed to a secret electoral pact with presidential hopeful Bustamante. When the APRA vote secured him the presidency, Bustamante honored his side of the agreement by declaring APRA legal, allowing the party to compete in congressional elections (in 1945). APRA won so many seats that it dominated both houses of Congress—a position from which it was able to push for pro-labor reforms that were very alarming to the authorities.

Shortly after the failed coup, senior military officers staged a coup of their own, deposed Bustamante, and installed General Odria. In an attempt to rid society of APRA-Communism, Odria unleashed a nationwide reign of terror against the party. In addition to arresting all Apristas in Congress, he appointed military prefects in departments where APRA was especially strong. His government also claimed sweeping powers of search and seizure, suspended civil liberties, and outlawed the party. These changes imposed narrow limits on what could be said or done and extended government surveillance into the most intimate spheres of life.

The military conceived of its struggle with APRA-Communism as a war to eliminate the party. The government recognized that this would require engagements along multiple fronts. From 1945 to 1948, the party had made the most of its position of legality by organizing across a number of social domains. The Apristas had published their own widely read newspaper (La Tribuna) and had formed a nationwide network of community centers, youth groups, and “popular universities.” The party had also provided extensive legal aid, health services, and social assistance to the poor. These activities had extended the movement well beyond APRA’s original base in organized labor (Klaren 1973).

The military viewed all of these organizations as points from which APRA’s corrupting influence radiated outward into the population and ordered them closed. The authorities feared, however, that APRA had also established itself in organizations that were not openly linked to the party. As a result, the military also began to scrutinize seemingly innocuous organizations (e.g., volleyball teams and debating societies) for telltale signs of party sympathy.

In addition to purging the public domain of party influence, the military also sought to rid the state apparatus of all party members. When interrogation and torture failed to provide party membership lists, government officials took a different approach to producing the intelligence necessary to identify party members. They transformed the apparatus of state into a vast mechanism for the production of secret military intelligence. Functionaries at each level of government were ordered to provide their superiors with the names of all Apristas under their jurisdiction. In short order, information began pouring in from all corners of Amazonas, allowing the prefect to compile a master list of subversives.11

This information painted a very alarming picture, because large numbers of Apristas were to be found in every branch of government—including the judiciary and the police, who were responsible for prosecuting the war against APRA. Government intelligence made it clear that the boundaries of the state apparatus had been deeply compromised and that drastic measures would be needed if the state were to purge itself. The prefect did not hesitate and proceeded to “cleanse” the state. Beginning in January 1949, all Apristas in public service were fired. Many were arrested, and some were tortured.

Having rid the public domain of APRA, the military was equally quick to fill the discursive space left vacant. The government sought to ensure that a particular image of APRA, the military, and Peruvian society would appear to emerge spontaneously in key discursive arenas. This image depicted Peruvian society as a single loyal public that stood united against a subversive organization of fanatics. The government was depicted as a selfless organization whose mission it was to protect that loyal public from the evils of APRA.

In waging this war of representation, the government used its control over public discourse—especially Chachapoyas’ sole newspaper, The Families’ Friend—to bombard the public sphere with anti-APRA messages. The first of the “weapons” it deployed consisted of open letters, signed by all the town’s prominent (male) citizens, pledging undying allegiance to General Odria and unconditional opposition to APRA.12 By publishing these letters in The Families’ Friend, the government attempted to define what was normal—a public that was loyal to the military—and to show that “most people” embraced this normative construction.

The second discursive weapon deployed against APRA consisted of an oath of loyalty, which virtually all public employees signed (refusal meant arrest and possible torture).13 One


after another, these oaths were published in The Families’ Friend. The third discursive weapon used against the party was an offer of amnesty. The government announced that subversives who were willing to renounce the party would be granted a clean slate. Knowing that amnesty represented their best chance of avoiding jail, many Apristas took advantage of the offer, and renunciations began to pour into the prefect’s office. These, too, were published in The Families’ Friend, showing that Apristas were defecting from the party in droves.

Anti-epistemology of the Everyday

The government’s offensive against APRA appeared to have swept the enemy from the field. Large numbers of subversives had been arrested, APRA institutions had been dissolved, and sympathetic (?) organizations were under close scrutiny. So successful did the campaign appear to have been that the military began to speak confidently of the “death” of APRA. The military soon realized, however, that the war was far from over. Officials came to believe that they not only had failed to defeat APRA but had only partially succeeded at engaging the enemy.

The difficulties the military experienced in waging war against APRA were a function of its failure to carry out what many theorists of the state (cf., Scott 1998) regard as crucial government functions: the ability to identify key “objects of regulation” (subversive threats), draw on a body of experts or authorities (government functionaries) to monitor the behavior of these objects, and produce reliable knowledge about these objects (Apristas) that could be used to affect strategies of control. Especially debilitating to state projects was the fact that officials had extremely faulty information about the identities of party members. It was the inability to know APRA that made it so difficult to control—or even engage—the enemy.

Government officials began to question the reliability of their knowledge about the party for a quite simple reason. A great many people who had been denounced as Apristas wrote to the prefect protesting their innocence. These letters made the disturbing claim that the many people who had been arrested, APRA institutions had been dissolved, and sympathetic (?) organizations were under close scrutiny. So officials had extremely faulty information about the identities of party members. It was the inability to know APRA that made it so difficult to control—or even engage—the enemy.

Government officials began to question the reliability of their knowledge about the party for a quite simple reason. A great many people who had been denounced as Apristas wrote to the prefect protesting their innocence. These letters made officials question their intelligence about APRA for two reasons. First, those writing the letters made the disturbing claim that the individuals who had falsely accused them were the very state functionaries that the prefect had relied on to provide him with accurate, impartial information about APRA. Second, the letters made the equally disturbing assertion that these functionaries had been utterly indifferent to the state’s desire to learn the truth about APRA. They had been motivated instead by vengeance, greed, or the desire to advance their careers.

High-ranking officials were deeply dismayed to learn that their subordinates had violated the public trust. They had done so by falsely accusing the innocent and failing to denounce the guilty. This realization produced in government officials a kind of “crisis of faith”—not only in their intelligence but also in the personnel that had gathered and acted upon that intelligence. Officials’ doubts about their subordinates led them to see the state as deeply compromised. Their doubts about the reliability of their intelligence led them to suspect that they had failed to identify the subversive social element, placing in grave jeopardy the state’s entire project of ridding society of APRA’s corrupting influence. In other words, officials experienced a crisis about their ability to know and therefore to control or contain the party. That is, they experienced a deep and profound crisis of power/knowledge.

A second crisis associated with government efforts to defeat APRA focused less on the accuracy of its intelligence and more on the reliability of its representations. In depicting itself as defending a broad consensus that regarded APRA as a dangerous evil, the military used its control over discourse to construct a “loyal public.” After diverse social groups had sworn before society at large to be a part of the anti-APRA consensus, however, it became common knowledge that many people had used these testimonials to conceal rather than reveal their actual beliefs. For example, police intelligence revealed that many Apristas who had sworn to have left the party had continued their involvement in APRA in secret, despite public claims to the contrary. It also became common knowledge that many people who had signed loyalty oaths and open letters of allegiance were not part of the “loyal public.” Some of these people were out-and-out Apristas who were willing to perjure themselves before society at large to continue with their secret, underground lives. Others were alarmingly sympathetic to APRA and refused to divulge information to the police about Aprista friends and relatives.

Once government officials discovered that people had used the letters of allegiance, oaths of loyalty, and renunciations to conceal their actual political inclinations, what suffered was not simply the credibility of these individuals. The authorities came to doubt their ability to distinguish between people who were actually loyal to the regime and those who were only pretending to be—cynically trading on the image of the model citizen or the penitent Aprista to deceive the police. As the boundary began to blur between healthy and subversive social elements, officials were forced to wonder whether public proclamations of loyalty did not indicate the opposite of what they claimed.

In other words, government officials came to believe that APRA was alive and well in a deep, subterranean realm lying beneath the surface of things—a realm that their campaign had been unable to touch. Untold numbers of people continued to inhabit that realm, the authorities suspected. Although these individuals represented themselves as part of the loyal public, officials came to believe that they could not trust the level of appearance. The authorities ultimately concluded, then, that they had failed to purge society of the corrupting influence of APRA despite a surface appearance of normalcy, tranquility, and calm.

Government officials responded to these discoveries by extending their surveillance to society as a whole. In the process,

they showed that they doubted the existence of the very loyal public that they claimed to be defending. As a result, it became clear that even the state did not believe what the “state stated” (Corrigan and Sayer 1985:3). As state and general populace held each other in mutually intersecting gazes of awareness concerning this fact, the state experienced a deep and profound crisis of representation.

These crises of power/knowledge and representation were never resolved. The military continued to impose a state of security on society but abandoned any hope of determining who was and was not an Aprista. For its part, APRA retreated back into the shadows. It continued to operate surreptitiously, just beneath the surface, in a way that would not raise official concerns. The government again began to treat the party as a second-order standard deviation. In time, this led to a further relaxation on the part of the authorities—at which point the party once again became a first-order standard deviation.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have drawn upon government responses to APRA to explore the dynamics of a distinctive, mid-twentieth-century corruption/anti-corruption complex. My focus has been on the shadow worlds imagined into being by government officials as they sought to shore up national boundaries that they regarded as dangerously compromised by the forces of international Aprista corruption. I have been equally concerned with the techniques that officials developed to purge the political order of corruption. My analysis has also attempted to shed light on the peculiar state optic that emerged during this era—which mediated government efforts to see the shadow worlds that officials considered such a profound danger.

I have also sought to show how the mid-twentieth-century corruption/anti-corruption complex differs from its contemporaneous neoliberal counterpart. Perhaps the key difference is that the earlier complex focused on different boundaries than those that are of concern today. It was not the domain of the public that was seen as being at risk from the private but rather the domain of the private—the particularistic, the accumulating—that was regarded as being under dire threat from an alarming expansion of an emergent global public.

A second major difference concerns the topography of corruption in the two eras. In the contemporary world, debates about corruption are largely intranational. They play out within particular nation-states, as the publics of each struggle to understand and contain the dangers represented by the expansion of private appropriating powers. During the mid-twentieth century, however, it was just the opposite. Rather than acrimonious debates about corruption raging between subgroups within the same national community, each nation-state as a whole sought to contain the corrupt, globalizing forces that were gathering at the nation’s borders.

This points to a third major difference between the two eras. In the contemporary world, governments are indispensable to the process of reconfiguring the public/private divide that is the focus of corruption concerns. As a result, they are directly implicated in corrupt practices. At mid-century, however, the situation was reversed. Because it was the boundaries of the nation that were at issue, the national polities of the era sought to police those boundaries with great care. Rather than national governments being implicated in corrupt practices, government was at the forefront of efforts to prevent the spread of those practices.

At mid-century, processes of globalization generated widespread fears of corruption, as is also true today. Furthermore, fears of corruption named what had to be expelled in order to enshrine legitimate sovereignty. Then as now, the threat of corruption was considered a constant—something that required “repetitive, incomplete attempts to cleanse the political order” (see Muir and Gupta 2018). What differed between the two eras was, on the one hand, what was named as the corrupting forces that had to be expelled. What differed as well was what these corrupting forces had to be expelled from.

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The Unbearable Discretion of Street-Level Bureaucrats
Corruption and Collusion in Hong Kong

by Alan Smart

Since 1974, Hong Kong has gone from being pervasively corrupt to being the best example of effective anti-corruption programs and, most recently, to experiencing widespread concerns about collusion and corruption convictions at the top levels of the government. I examine these transformations, focusing on the role of informal processes operating within government and how policies may have consequences that are very different from those that were intended. The colonial government believed that the problem of corruption resulted from the discretion of junior officials, and anti-corruption efforts during the colonial period focused on reducing this discretion and, more broadly, on changing the “rules of the game.” A case study of boat squatters in the 1960s reveals this worldview, the operation of corruption rackets, and efforts to reduce these problems through setting clear procedures. Yet formal procedures can reduce the risks involved in profiting from public office in ways that are often seen by the public as illicit even when they are formally legal. Precise formalization of what counts as corrupt allows opportunistic rent-seekers to skirt closely to the limits of legality while remaining safely on the legal side. Sharp boundaries between corrupt and noncorrupt offer great possibilities for gaming the system. Even when legal, collusion can be as damaging as or worse than corruption.

Hong Kong has gone from being seen as deeply and corrosively corrupt before 1974 to being a “poster child” for effective anti-corruption programs and, most recently, to experiencing a fall from grace after a series of corruption charges and convictions at the very top level of the government. This article will examine these transformations and suggest that such shifts can be understood through attention to the informal processes operating within government and to how policies may have consequences that are very different from those that were intended. Effective anti-corruption programs require much more than targeting “bad apples” but less than transforming an entire culture (Smith 2018). Instead, to be effective, there needs to be fundamental change in the operation of the informal norms of governmental routine, in the “rules of the game” (De Herdt and Olivier de Sardan 2015).

My approach to corruption in this article can be usefully situated by reference to Michel Foucault’s brief comments on environmentality in The Birth of Biopolitics (2008). Foucault’s usage was a diagnosis of an elaboration beyond the governmentality of working on a population, rather than directly on individuals, at a greater distance (Gabrys 2014). Action “is brought to bear on the rules of the game rather than on the players” and with an “environmental type of intervention” (Foucault 2008:260). The environments in which people act are modified, affecting their interests and effective tactics, rather than acting on people directly. However, environmental interventions can have perverse as well as intended consequences.

In Hong Kong, a key part of efforts to end endemic corruption by changing the rules of the game can be seen in minimizing the informal discretion of frontline officers, who were perceived as a crucial source of bribery. This in turn increased the distance between the government and the people (including in good ways, through reducing predation) and encouraged a bureaucracy more focused on formal rules than on the achievement of practical goals. Decolonization and the rise of new influences from Beijing on the Hong Kong government appear to have undermined anti-corruption rules by encouraging collusion and facilitating new forms of corruption at the top levels of the government.

Hong Kong has been seen as the world’s best example of “successful transformation from widespread corruption in the 1960s to clean government in the 1970s” (Manion 2004:2). A key element in this success was precise demarcation between legal practices and illegal corruption. For example, to avoid being punishable as bribery, acceptable gifts to government officials were limited by value, the maximum varying on the basis of the closeness of the relationship. Administration, at least in Weberian forms, requires sharp boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable practices.

It was also thought crucial to limit official discretion, particularly among officers who worked at the street level. In 1960,
Governor Robert Black wrote to the Colonial Secretary in London that “the exercise of discretionary power by junior officers is inevitably open to abuse. When we begin a revision of the laws in November, it is intended to pay particular attention to those laws which give discretion to junior officers.” Anti-corruption is often thought to be best achieved through reducing opportunities for corruption (Feldman 2018). Setting out clear procedures for how governmental work should be done reduces the scope for discretion. A report of the Advisory Committee on Corruption stated that a key response to corruption problems was that “licensing procedures have been simplified, accelerated and clarified.” Licensing should be closely examined and reformed because “procedural delays could cause corruption in some form or other. The Organizational Survey Unit is also continually seeking ways of improving procedures, forms, etc.” Corruption is thus seen as resulting in part from the informality of governmental practice, particularly when those practices bring government officials into regular contact with the public. Informality is seen as creating risks, and the lesson that is drawn is that formalizing governmental and other procedures reduces corruption.

Hong Kong’s successes have been emulated elsewhere, to varying effect. For squatters and street vendors, petty extortion became rarer after the creation of the Indepedency Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in 1974. I agree with Gupta (2012:76) that corruption “becomes a form of structural violence by placing a value on goods that should be available free from the state and thereby denying some of the poorest people the means to sustain life.” Yet it does not necessarily follow that interventions directed at preventing corruption, even when genuine, have positive outcomes for the disadvantaged.

In the next section, I consider corruption in methodological terms, in which I include theoretical issues of conceptualization. Then I examine the operation of informality within governmental agencies dealing with informal economic practices in the 1960s. Street-level corruption was endemic at that time according to most observers. I analyze one extended example to illustrate how a “racket” operated as well as how rules were applied when complaints about corruption emerged. Following that, I consider widespread public belief in increasing collusion between the Hong Kong government and powerful businesses, particularly in the property development industry. The processes will be illustrated through a consideration of the conviction in 2014 of Rafael Hui, the chief secretary for administration from 2005 to 2007, the second-highest-ranking position in the government, for taking bribes from a property company. His boss, Donald Tsang, was convicted in 2017 of misconduct in office, with a sentence of 20 months. If the streets have been cleaned of corruption, it seems that there is still room at the top.

Corruption, Some Methodological Issues

Corruption is challenging to study, even leaving aside the fundamental question of what exactly it is. Even when people speak frankly about it, their perceptions and narratives of the prevalence and operation of corruption may still be at odds with “reality” (Parry 2000). Gunnar Myrdal (1968) referred to the “folklore of corruption,” which exaggerates or downplays prevalence. Mismatches between practice and discourse present fundamental limitations for Transparency International’s “Corruption Perceptions Index” (Hetherington 2011). Government officials have incentives not to disclose particulars to researchers, although long-term ethnography can provide excellent material on what is “really going on” behind the party-line discourse of conforming to policies and rules (De Herdt and Olivier de Sardan 2015; Gupta 2012).

Beyond formal and legal conceptions, corruption can be defined socially. Informal definitions influence who conforms to official rules on bribery and other forms of malfeasance (Pardo 2018). Informal understandings of legitimate practices that might be “technically” corrupt are not just illegal but also part of compromise, getting things done, and just getting along (Ansell 2018). Formality without informal “work-arounds” and quick fixes breaks down. At the same time, formal procedures can reduce the risks involved in profiting from public office in ways that are often seen by the public as illicit even when formally legal. Those with power can cross the line more easily with less risk. Ending illegal corruption may encourage legal forms of collusion.

Precise definitions of legality may have detrimental outcomes as well as benefits. Turning gray areas into sharp divisions between legal and illegal may foster unscrupulous but mostly legal behaviors of collusion. Ledeneva (2006) describes such political techniques as “gray PR.” Opportunistic rent-seekers may find it easier to skirt closer to the limits of legality while still being safely on the legal side when that side is explicitly inscribed. In such circumstances, they can adhere only to the letter of the law, without concern for its “spirit.” Exact formalization of what counts as corrupt may make things worse for ordinary people, or for anyone who cannot afford lawyers. If this is a common result, then we should carefully scrutinize reforms intended to end or reduce corruption. Good intentions do not guarantee good and equitable outcomes. Sharp boundaries between corrupt and noncorrupt may offer more impunity for those trying to game the system—that is, attempting to look admirable in the light of bureaucratic measurements of achievement. While governments may change the rules of the game, the rules are transformed through the maneuvering of citizens. The rich and powerful have access to resources that may help them, in particular, to manipulate technicalities, possibly affecting the laws and their administrative interpretation. The loss of governmental legitimacy that could result from public perception of collusion might, in turn, encourage corrupt practices on the part of ordinary people, on the grounds that those at the top are getting away with it.

1. Colonial Office 1030/1386, to Colonial Secretary, September 2, 1960. Documents were accessed in microfilm at the Hong Kong Public Records Office.
2. Hong Kong Record Series 160-5-5 “Advisory committee on corruption.”
Political scandals create “moments of transparency” (Schneider 2018; Schneider and Schneider 1999). Although I have studied bribery in the field previously, in this article I use archival research to reach behind public secrecy—but with an eye for the mundane more than the spectacle of the scandal. Scandals can best be understood in the context of prevailing or conflicting rules of the game. Seeing behind the scandal becomes possible because officials did not seem to consider the possibility that their written comments in confidential documents would see light in their lifetimes, a reasonable assumption when those documents were embargoed for 50 years. Freedom of information legislation may encourage officials to avoid putting anything contentious on paper, perhaps relying on removable Post-it notes (Sharma 2018). In the absence of such “paranoia” (see Nugent 2018), confidential documents about corruption scandals and campaigns allow us to combine moments of transparency with the background of routine discussion, as conducted in circulating minutes, by attending to their dialogue about moments of scandal. I focus on informal practices of administration that shade into, or become, corruption. My treatment of corruption scandals in contemporary Hong Kong is more limited, relying on public information about them and my analysis of earlier practices and informal norms.

Neoliberal times have seen near-universal disdain for corruption paralleled by acclaim for social capital as a cure for social and developmental problems. Overlap between the two phenomena is rarely acknowledged. Networks, trust, obligation, and a reliance on informal arrangements: all are part of both corruption and social capital. Only by assuming that corruption is clearly defined and distinct from social capital is it possible for their simultaneous condemnation and celebration to be maintained. Yet, as the contributions to this issue of Current Anthropology demonstrate, defining corruption in a cross-culturally valid manner is difficult if not impossible.

Corruption discourse is a central part of the story. We perform corruption talk in many situations. When it is not “just” gossip but contestation, our performances of innocence and guilt, fault and obligation, rely on interpretation by others. How they perceive what we say influences whether particular actions and relationships come to be perceived and labeled as corrupt. The definition of corruption cannot be restricted to legal definitions. The idea is more useful if it also includes contested, rather than only consensual, moral evaluations (see Smith 2018). Inept performance can result in the failure of a gift exchange if it is disdained as a corrupt bribe. Skillful operators who bribe in the guise of giving may attempt to maintain plausible deniability.

In China, the widely discussed and utilized set of activities and relationships known as guanxi (meaning “connections” but with wider connotations) illustrates these dynamics and their consequences. Guanxi practice may be described as neutral or even positive. However, people find it difficult to articulate the difference between “good” guanxi practice and “bad” corruption. Mayfair Yang says her interviewees struggled to explain why “reasonable” (heil) guanxi practice was not corruption. Corruption was “for selfish, individual-gain purposes, and it is not legal,” but guanxi practice was used only for “reasonable demands” and connoted “human sentiments’ (renqing), friendship, long-term personal relationships, and the image of people helping one another” (Yang 1994:62–63). Relationships, trust, and confidence can be seen negatively as corruption. This happened repeatedly during the Cultural Revolution (Vogel 1965). Relationships might instead be seen positively, as friendship or solidarity within a family or among colleagues.

Guanxi is ambiguous: presented as morally better than corruption or as merging with and inseparable from it. Even if distinguishable, guanxi can be corrupted. For others, though, it is more human than the cold and calculating practices of capitalism.

Disagreements about the labeling of practices were particularly important during the early period of China’s economic reforms (1979–1992). Incorporating capitalist practices into a Communist state was facilitated by ambiguity and tacit acceptance of things that were not (yet) legal or adequately regulated by administrative guidelines (Smart and Zerilli 2014). The experimental and geographical diversity of the reform process resulted in uncertainty about what was legal at particular times and places. The rules of the game had to be significantly worked out on the ground as issues arose. Questions about morality resulted, both from the overall development strategy and from local contests over what was right and wrong, black or merely gray. Newly legal practices, such as the dismissal of workers, were often seen as immoral even when legal (Galagher 2002). Similarly, in Poland in 1986, Janine Wedel (2012:474) found that “what is legal is often not considered moral; what is illegal is often considered moral.”

In contrast to the sometimes-positive rhetoric associated with guanxi, the discourse of fubai (corruption) and tanwu (bribery) is thoroughly negative. The words themselves elicit disgust: the “fu” in fubai means “decayed” or “corroded” and can be used to refer to rotting food, while the “wu” in tanwu is “filth” or “pollution.” In China, corruption is associated with the abuse of political power. Whether something is corrupt depends on not just its category but also its context: the attitude of the perpetrator and the effects of the action. In late-imperial China, officials were so underfunded that they were compelled to collect illegal fees and surcharges above the official tax quotas in order to run their offices and do their jobs. Most officials added at least a little padding. As long as the amounts did not exceed “reasonable” levels, soliciting bribes for these purposes was considered socially acceptable (Lui 1979:3). However, if local officials exploited their jurisdictions to the point that the subjects suffered, their behavior would be considered intolerable and criminally corrupt (Lui 1979:4–8).

Bribery violates the principles of guanxi gift exchange by making instrumental gain the sole purpose. Relationships between participants are abused in the process. Actors engaged in bribery adopt the forms and expressions of gift and guanxi, although savvy participants see the transaction as a sham. If a
guanxi transaction involves state actors, elicits “unreasonable” gain, and harms people that the state actors are supposed to serve, people usually see it as corruption. While Chinese people do not believe that all guanxi is corrupt, almost all believe that corruption usually involves guanxi. Guanxi and corruption are separate but overlapping. The definition of corruption depends on social definitions of “state actor,” “reasonable gain,” and “harm to the people”—concepts that not only shift according to time and locality but are also performed and contested. Benefiting from a position in government or business was not always perceived, during the early reform era, as corruption. Instead, characterizing someone or something as “dirty” was accomplished through complex processes of performance and interpretation. Tactful performance in social interaction is crucial (Smart and Hsu 2007).

In earlier publications, I explored these issues in research on business ties across the border between Hong Kong and China in the 1980s. Bhagwati’s redefinition of governmental “rent” into the concept of directly unproductive activity has strongly influenced economic work on corruption. Josephine Smart and I criticized the term for assuming its consequences, which cannot be assumed, because they are contingent on circumstances. In economies that clearly are not in equilibrium (granting the questionable claim that any are), like China’s during the early reform era, rent-seeking on the part of officials may generate new wealth, not just redistribute it, and may contribute to development. Corruption, like social capital, may in certain contexts promote local development. Among the outcomes of experimental local capitalism in the eastern Pearl River Delta, immediately north of Hong Kong, was the transformation not only of China but also of the world economy, as the region became the new workshop of the world (Smart and Hsu 2007; Smart and Smart 2005).

Fuzzy property rights were seen as one of China’s biggest problems in the early reform era, and this problem is still far from resolved. However, in many ways, nonfuzzy property rights might not be an improvement (Lin 2009). The clarification of property rights can weaken the position of less powerful people, heightening inequality and exclusion (Smart 2010). Between 1979 and 1992, Chinese officials were vulnerable to criticism and gossip. Reforms might be reversed, and early movers could be accused of “taking the capitalist road.” This situation encouraged engaging in corruption and performing other dubious practices in ways that could be of greater advantage to the locality, or at least to more of the locals (Smart and Hsu 2007). Poor villagers were more likely to receive a share, in some contexts making them quite wealthy (Li and Smart 2012; Smart and Smart 2001). These constraints diminished with the routinization of capitalism after 1992. Rapid growth in more predatory and less developmental forms of corruption, such as uncompensated land grabs, has resulted (Smart 2010). Making clearer what actions were legal, even if seen as socially illegitimate, silenced informal voices. It contributed to a massive growth of inequality and corruption. The growth of mass protests against land seizures, despite heavy repression by the government, suggests longer term consequences of the loss of informal constraints by local people on what are seen as unreasonable forms of corruption. These practical issues should make it clear that questions of how to define corruption and how to acquire information about its prevalence and practice are not simply academic; they have real-world consequences for finding ways to effectively deploy governmental resources to foster development that is simultaneously inclusive and effective.

In this article, I concentrate on governmental constructions of corruption, but my understanding of corruption is not confined to legal definitions. Governments also have informal practices that operate through the medium of what De Herdt and Olivier de Sardan (2015) call “practical norms.” The latter diverge from formal definitions of corruption and often involve attempts to “get the job done” in difficult or impossible circumstances. For both ordinary citizens and civil servants, there are distinctions between legitimate acts, regardless of whether the law might consider them bribes or corruption, and illicit acts that are in no way corrupt or illegal. States, or more concretely agents of the state, make claims about corruption to justify their actions—for example, by scapegoating some of their own agents to demonstrate the probity of the state in general—but the public also represents the state through corruption discourse (Gupta 2012; Muir 2015).

The line between legal and illegal is formally assumed to be clear and definitive, but due to the fundamental indeterminacy of legal rules, actual practices are ambiguous and subject to resourceful manipulation. Legality and illegality are “simultaneously black and white, and shades of gray” (Heyman and Smart 1999:11). Gray zones emerge from conflicts between what is formally legal and informally legitimate, or vice versa. Banning socially legitimate practices with formal prohibition has historically been a major cause of growing illegality. In Hong Kong, both squatting and street vending, among many other informal practices, were located in such zones of ambivalence between social legitimacy and formal illegality (Smart and Smart 2017). Recognition of the informal legitimacy of finding a place to live and a way to make a living encouraged toleration of these informal practices, particularly in the tough years of the 1950s. This situation, in turn, conditioned informal practices of government.

In the next section, I explore these dynamics through the lens of a corruption case involving marine police, squatting control officers, boat squatters, a boat breaker, and resettlement arrangements in a typhoon shelter. Later, I consider corruption from above in the case of convicted Chief Secretary Rafael Hui.

Corrupting Informality in the 1960s

Before the 1970s, taking bribes was widespread in Hong Kong's government, particularly among street-level officials. They had to deal with a Chinese population distant from a government that it had no electoral influence over. Many refugees brought
expectations from Republican China that dealing with the government was best avoided and, if necessary, required bribes. Since many had to break laws to survive, opportunities for squeezing squatters, hawkers, and unlicensed factory operators abounded. Observers considered that the problem emerged in part because the colonial legal rules "concerning corruption were incongruent with Chinese 'folk norms'; what the law regarded as corrupt, ordinary Chinese people often saw as a normal part of life" (Hampton 2012:228). The danger of Orientalism in corruption discussions, pointed out by Gupta (2012:81), is visible here, but dubious stereotypes clearly have empirical consequences, in this case providing legitimation for Europeans who profited from taking bribes.

Anything that is regulated creates opportunities for profits by those with discretion over control of the activity: one scandal concerned testing for driving licenses (Goodstadt 2011; see Hornberger 2018). Domains where the government tolerated informal practices, such as squatting, were particularly prone to corruption. Unlicensed street vendors "were perhaps the most vulnerable" (Hampton 2012:228). A senior official in the Resettlement Department wrote that he regularly rotated his junior officers out of squatter control to limit the temptations that they faced (Hayes 1996). The police had "ready opportunities" for corruption because they were responsible for issuing licenses to "massage parlours, dancing schools, public dance halls, billiard room and money changers" (Jones and Vagg 2007:358). Corruption syndicates operated among the police. Regular payments—for example, for turning a "blind eye" to illegal gambling establishments—were distributed among officers. Alan Ellis, a police officer who refused to accept his share, was subjected to heavy harassment, and he later became a prominent critic of corruption in Hong Kong.

Discretion by government agents has often been seen as a source of differential justice discriminating in favor of the majority or the powerful and against minorities and stigmatized groups (Côté-Boucher 2016; Heyman 2009). It is also sometimes seen as unavoidable if street-level bureaucrats are to be able to effectively perform their jobs (Lipsky 2010). Formalizing rules for state officers does not necessarily end discretion, but it may instead tend to displace it to less regulated fields or practices (Heyman 2009:384). A multiplicity of sometimes-inconsistent rules may facilitate discretion (Ericson and Haggerty 1997). Côté-Boucher (2016) found, however, that the extensive use of databases and automated decision-making in border policing in Canada had substantially reduced border agents' discretion, moving decisions away from ports of entry. It seems likely that the outcomes of administrative efforts to reduce discretion by street-level bureaucrats will vary greatly by the specific nature of their position, the stakes of the particular issues, and the practical power of those officials to control information, among other variables. Rather than attempting to discuss discretion and corruption in the administration of Hong Kong's informal sector practices in general (see Smart and Smart 2017), I concentrate on a case that is well documented and raises important issues about anti-corruption reforms.

Corruption cases may provide a wealth of detail on mundane processes that otherwise receive little attention in official records. Moments of transparency may shed light on things more routinely shadowed (Schneider and Schneider 1999), revealing routine processes of governance as well as more spectacular cases of corruption at the top. My case study here concerns the salvaging of inhabited boats moored in harbors affected by reclamation in 1965. Urban Councillor Elsie Elliott reported the case. It was investigated by the Anti-corruption Branch, an antecedent to the ICAC. It operated as a unit within the Royal Hong Kong Police Force, not independent of it.

Witnesses reported that 21 boats had been demolished without the residents being listed for resettlement. Some of the boat squatters were alleged to have paid in order to be resettled. It was asserted that this "black fee," variously reported as HK$150 up to HK$1,500, was collected by a boat breaker named Chung Kau, who acted as a go-between for the government officers involved and the boat squatters. Initial investigations among the boat squatter community confirmed the allegations.

Compared with land squatters, the numbers of which peaked at around 800,000 in 1982, boat squatters were fewer in number, but they also raised strategic problems for the government. The total marine population, which also included those who lived and worked on boats, was 136,802 in 1960; it decreased to 72,897 in 1971 and to only 11,102 by 1991 (Airriess 2014). However, the mountainous nature of Hong Kong's topography has meant that, from shortly after its founding as a British colony in 1842, reclamation from the sea has been a key part of the provision of urban land and, in turn, has been central to government revenues (Smart and Lee 2003; Tang 2008). People living on boats in the typhoon shelters of the harbors were obstacles to reclamation and development, and unlike land squatters, they were generally only eligible for resettlement in public housing when such reclamations were under way.

Christopher Airriess (2014:122) argues that this differential treatment was due to official worries about the mobility of boat squatters, which could provide "incentives to 'imposters' not deserving of public housing" (compare Feldman's [2018] discussion of how fraud by imposters affecting food rations for refugees was treated as corruption). The difficulty for governmental control of new boats moving in to replace those displaced through resettlement was that it might produce an "open-ended commitment" to rehousing, something that was consistently resisted in government policy (Smart 2006). This situation created potential for corruption. Both genuine boat squatters and "imposters" hoping to find a way to jump the queue into public housing had incentives to offer gifts or bribes to be included as eligible for resettlement.

The clearance of boat squatters in the Cheung Sha Wan harbor in New Kowloon began in 1964. Temporary licenses

3. All details on this case are from the Hong Kong Record Series 180-1-1. Documents were accessed in microfilm at the Hong Kong Public Records Office.
beating the name of the boat owner and the number of occupants were issued to those found living on floating boats during an inspection, a process called “tabulation.” The policy was that boats that rested on the ground during low tide, rather than floating, were not “genuine” squatter boats. A white number was painted on each eligible boat. Once accommodation became available, the family would move into a resettlement estate upon surrender of their boat for destruction. The boats involved in the corruption case were “grounded boats near the seashore, and they were in no way eligible for tabulation.” These boats were marked with red paint. On clearance, they were eligible for “resites,” a form of officially tolerated self-building on allocated plots. These later became the temporary housing areas, eventually renamed “interim housing” (Smart and Chui 2006). Resites were generally disliked, and this was particularly true for boat squatters, since their locations were often distant from the waterfront, where their livelihoods and social networks were based. Four families from two boats among these grounded boats were offered resettlement rather than resites. It was discovered that the boat breaker, Mr. Chung, had made arrangements with three squatter control officers for the sale of these two boats and their tabulation as floating boats. One officer collected a total of HK$4,100 from the four families. The three admitted the fraudulent arrangements as well as having received cash, meals, and drinks for having participated.

An officer with the Marine Department reported that tabulation was done “purely on his discretion and unless it appeared that it was a doubtful case, tabulation would normally be offered to any boat squatters who claimed for it.” His superior reported that there were “no policy file or instructions in the Marine Dept. as to how his officers should carry out the tabulation. Their intention was to inspect and tabulate all boats in the area. . . . The officer doing the tabulation should use his initiative and discretion as to the eligibility of the boat squatters.” The Anti-corruption Branch concluded that the complaints from the boat squatters were intended to “delay the clearance programme and to gain preferential treatment from the Government Departments.”

Despite the confessions of the officers, it was concluded that there was “insufficient evidence to develop any criminal case” because corroborating evidence was said to be based on hearsay. Officers received administrative penalties related to receiving gifts and neglect of duty. The Marine Department was found to have performed the tabulation in a “chaotic and unsystematic manner. There were no rules or regulations” to govern eligibility for tabulation. Even after the initial tabulation, anyone could buy a boat and ask to be tabulated, as the four families did. This situation facilitated corruption and extortion, given the desirability of access to resettlement compared with a resite. Resettlement was delayed for various reasons, which allowed time for corrupt practices to be considered by evil thinkers and doers in the interim because, once it becomes known that resettlement of boat squatters is being considered there is a tendency for an increase in the number of squatter boats in the area. . . . Consequently, the delay or deferment in the programme for resettlement . . . did little to help in minimizing the problems in screening squatter boats. One has only to see the chaos, squalor and confusion in the conditions of squatter boats packed tightly together in every available space, in order to appreciate the difficulties under which these officers have to work in the field.

It was also noted that the use of the term “license” in the tabulation exercise was “unfortunate” since it normally implies the payment of a fee. A suggestion that a senior officer be charged with neglect of duty for failing to tabulate the area in a proper manner was rejected because of the ease of defense that there had been no written instructions issued for him to follow, which “would only serve to highlight our own responsibility in this matter.” A senior police officer commented that, when urgent and unpopular measures have to be implemented,

it is the man in the field who is faced with the unenviable task of dealing with unpleasant incidents as they arise and who may be confronted later with malicious allegations by operators engaged in sharp practices who resent . . . the measures forced upon them. It is necessary in the interests of efficiency and morale that these men in the field are aware that they will receive backing from their superior officers. If these men are aware such backing can not be expected, then it can be anticipated their primary aim will not be to ensure that the task allotted to them is expeditiously and efficiently carried out but rather to ensure first of all that no criticism can be levelled at them either from the people with whom they have immediate dealings or from persons in other quarters.

Before the next boat squatter clearance, the system of tabulation was overhauled and “written instructions as to how the job was to be tackled” were issued. New forms were produced for the purpose, and copies were stored separately. After the ICAC was established, harsher punishments would have been imposed on the officers involved. However, the same trend toward greater specification of procedures to limit discretion, particularly among junior officers, became even more intensified. Although such emphasis on junior officers is often not explicit in anti-corruption literature, it is implicit in many reform recommendations. Janine Wedel (2012:470) concludes that prevailing assumptions about corruption as illegal, interchangeable with bribery, and confined to a single venue “made it easier to see corruption as an affliction of the rank-and-file bureaucrat.”

These were the conditions that the ICAC set out to reform. Many accounts have been provided of Hong Kong’s reform efforts. Briefly, the failure of the earlier Anti-corruption Branch as a unit within the police force was interpreted to require an independent agency, since “the police were the most important public face of Government corruption” (Hampton 2012:229).
The ICAC was also provided with very strong powers of investigation, often described as “draconian.” New legislation made convictions easier to achieve, for example by making the possession of unexplained wealth an offense in itself. Official salaries were raised substantially, making street-level bribes less needed and attractive in relation to the potential loss of a lucrative salary. This emphasis on corruption among junior officials makes good political sense: as Gupta (2012:91) convincingly argues, “whereas higher-level state officials raise large sums from a relatively few people, lower-level officials collect it in small figures and on a daily basis from a very large number of people. This explains why corruption is so much more visible at the lower levels.” Being more visible, and involving lesser political costs from attacking it, the advantages of limiting or eradicating “retail” corruption are considerable.

There are many issues that arise from the effective implementation of anti-corruption policies in Hong Kong after 1974. For example, while legislation encompassed corrupt activities in both government and the private sector, resistance from business interests resulted in most effort being focused on government officers (Lo 1993). Space does not permit a treatment of the broader effects of the creation of the ICAC. Instead, my focus here is restricted to the ways in which corruption control was thought to require a disciplining of government employees through limitation of the scope of their discretion. While this approach was central to the ICAC-instigated reforms in the 1970s, the themes also emerged in earlier deliberations on the corruption problem. In 1964, the Advisory Committee on Corruption reported on reforms intended to reduce the problem. They included the simplification of procedures in the building ordinance, and other departmental licensing procedures were “simplified, accelerated and clarified.” Heads of departments were reminded of the need to do this “whenever it appears that procedural delays would cause corruption in some form or other.” This statement can be seen as a bureaucratic formulation of the aphorism that “time is money.” To address the conditions for corruption created by poor institutional design, the ICAC undertook a series of what it called “conventional studies” of the organization of work in government departments “with a view of understanding the opportunities for corruption in work procedures and suggesting ways to redesign procedures to minimize these opportunities” (Manion 2004:48–49). The changes in governance are in line with what has been described as “audit society” (Power 1997) and “audit culture” (Strathern 2000; see also Shore 2018). Yet government by targets is based on the assumption that “targets change the behaviour of individuals and organizations, but that ‘gamining’ can be kept to some acceptably low level” (Bevan and Hood 2006:521).

Anti-corruption efforts under ICAC were followed by a large drop in both the incidence and the public perception of corruption in government, contributing to the growth of Hong Kong as one of the world’s most important financial centers. The rise of China spurred growth in the finance industry. Profit opportunities in China were entangled with uncertain legal rights and widespread corruption. The clarity of the rule of law in Hong Kong made it the most attractive base from which to access the “China miracle.” Its attractions after reunification in 1997 are due in part to how Beijing gave Hong Kong considerable competitive advantages, such as with the Closer Economic Partnership Agreement. However, intense integration between Hong Kong and the rest of China has created great opportunities for widespread corruption in the mainland to seep back across the border or for corrupt practices within Hong Kong to be managed outside the Special Administrative Region’s borders.

In other ways, the campaign against corruption has not been an unlimited success. In the next section, I address some unintended consequences of the creation of precise definitions of what counts as corrupt. In particular, there has been increasingly intense concern about collusion between government and big business, which, even when it does not legally count as corrupt, is often seen as illegitimate. It has contributed, along with a democratic deficit, to a great loss of trust in the government (Smart and Lam 2009). Recently, the situation has gotten even worse due to the charging and conviction of officers for corruption at the very top level of government, which I turn to in the next section.

Precise Legality and Gaming the System

In the aftermath of the latest global financial crisis, many attempts have been made to reform banks that were said to be “too big to fail” and to control the attendant moral hazard that encourages them to take on too much risk. Despite such reform attempts, large investment banks were already finding ways to increase executive bonuses within a year of receiving bailout payments. Few think that the reforms have fundamentally fixed any problems (Goodstadt 2011). Complications arise in part from people “gaming the system”: acting so as to formally meet the enforcement measures while evading the intentions of those measures. Those who are said to be gaming the system try to look meritorious in the light of currently utilized measurements of achievement. Doing so frequently involves the employment of tactics that exploit ambiguity and flexibility “to bypass the rules while ostensibly honoring them” (Morreim 1991:443), “hitting the target and missing the point” (Bevan and Hood 2006:521). As critical legal scholars have argued, attempting to clarify the rules produces new ambiguities that inevitably rise when interpretations are given, so that later they may have to be interpreted in their turn. Such outcomes seem to have been the case with reforms in the wake of the financial crisis, resulting in the revival of subprime mortgages and the shifting of worry to financial malfeasance in other fields, such as student loans and car financing.

4. Hong Kong Record Series 160-5-5 “Advisory committee on corruption.”
Even if institutional reforms can make progress in specifying what is “in bounds” and what is “out of bounds,” what is legal and illegal, this simply creates new potentials for behavior undesired by the reformers. If you know that a political donation or a gift of $999 is legal and $1 more is illegal, then you can move as close to the limit as possible without breaking the rules. Sometimes collusion is hardened into institutions. An editorial in the Economist (2016b:11) asserted that the US Federal Reserve system “comes perilously close to letting bankers serve as their own regulators—not so much a revolving door between Wall Street and government, as a shared executive suite.”

Sharp boundaries between “corrupt” and “noncorrupt” may paradoxically offer more impunity for those trying to game the system. If payments to a politician in office as a “consultant” are banned, perhaps you can get around these rules by making the payments after they leave office, having previously communicated the likelihood through unrecorded conversations or winks and nods. This technique was used by Rafael Hui.

Even when no formal rules are broken, there are many forms in which government and business can cooperate in ways seen by many members of the public as immoral or illicit. I refer here to forms of collusion that are technically legal but meet widespread public disapproval. Despite the general belief that the ICAC has created “clean government,” public concern over collusion between government and business and its consequences has soared. Public trust of business leaders dropped from 19.9% in 2006 to 13.2% in 2011. The number of Hong Kong newspaper reports that mentioned “government business collusion” increased from a handful in 1998 to nearly 2,500 in 2006 (Fong 2013:873). This trend toward public distrust has intensified challenges for the government in recent years, with the Umbrella Revolution only the most spectacular example, since “the post-colonial state can no longer rely on its traditional political alliance with the business sector to maintain governance and accommodate the challenges of civil society” (Fong 2013:863). Recent arrests and convictions of top government leaders can only further erode public trust and increase belief in collusion that benefits the powerful at the expense of ordinary people.

Rafael Hui was Hong Kong’s former chief secretary for administration, the second most important position in the government. He was convicted for taking HK$8.5 million from Thomas Kwok, the former cochairman of Sun Hung Kai Properties (SHKP), through two middlemen shortly before he was sworn in as chief secretary in 2005 and HK$11.182 million from former SHKP executives Thomas Chan Kui-yuen and Francis Kwan Hung-sang after leaving office in 2007. Thomas Kwok was sentenced to 5 years’ imprisonment in December 2014 after a jury found him guilty of conspiracy to commit misconduct in public office in relation to these payments to Rafael Hui. In turn, Hui was convicted on three counts of Misconduct in Public Office and sentenced to seven and a half years in prison. Hui failed to disclose, or concealed, his receipt of various “benefits” from the Kwoks or SHKP-related entities.

An unsuccessful appeal argued that the prosecution failed to demonstrate that any favors had actually been delivered in return by Hui. Rather than there being any evidence of a specific quid pro quo, the payments were in return for Hui “being or remaining favourably disposed towards” Kwok or SHKP-related entities during the time he was chief secretary (Jackson 2015). Justice Yeung stated in the decision that “It will be a sad day for Hong Kong if senior public officers, such as Rafael Hui, could accept large sums of money and agreed to be favourably disposed towards their ‘paymasters’ in their public offices with impunity because the money or other advantages were paid before they assumed or after they left public office” (South China Morning Post 2016). Although the inappropriate payments were made outside the time of Hui’s term, the payments created a situation in which Hui was expected to be kept “sweet” and “favourably disposed” during his term and thereby constituted both misconduct in public office and conspiracy to commit misconduct (Jackson 2015).

Donald Tsang, the chief executive of Hong Kong (the top governmental position) from 2005 to 2012, was also charged with misconduct in office in 2015 and convicted in 2017. Tsang had “ended his term in disgrace in June 2012 after admitting to accepting gifts from tycoons in the form of trips on luxury yachts and private jets” (Guardian 2015). He is accused of profiting from approving applications for a digital broadcasting licence and arranging for an honor to be bestowed on his interior designer. Another high-profile incident that received wide public attention was that “both contenders for the post of the Chief Executive of Hong Kong were found to have illegally modified their homes in 2012, with the losing candidate being prosecuted” (Lai 2015:320). There are widespread reports of dropping morale in the ICAC after the 2016 removal of acting head of the ICAC’s investigative unit Rebecca Li Bo-lan, who had been examining the current chief executive’s business dealings (Economist 2016a). The acting head of operations and the chief forensic accountant subsequently resigned. Comments from political activists and former top civil servants (e.g., at a citizens’ forum on “Assault on the ICAC and the Rule of Law?” held in August 2016) reflect worry that the independence of ICAC is being undermined, thereby endangering Hong Kong’s reputation for a strong rule of law and potentially its status as a financial center.

Despite their high profile, these are only individual cases, and we cannot draw conclusions from them about the extent of corruption at high levels of the Hong Kong government. Still, they do support the belief that, while street-level corruption may still be relatively uncommon since the onset of the ICAC in 1974, there is room for corruption at the top of the system. Greater involvement of mainland-China-based companies in Hong Kong may have magnified temptations. Guanxi did retain importance in Hong Kong after 1972. However, networks and connections tended to operate in a tamed, or domesticated, form that was usually in conformity with the law, just as connections between alumni of Ivy League universities may be of great importance for careers without any laws being
broken. Economic and social reintegration of Hong Kong with China since 1979, and reunification under the “one country, two systems” formula since 1997, has had considerable influence on how connections operate within Hong Kong.

John Osburg (2018) discusses China’s intense anti-corruption campaign. Perhaps this will act against the growth of corruption in Hong Kong. But if so, it will in part be through a greater entanglement of Hong Kong’s leaders in the politics of the central government, something that, in itself, is increasing anger among Hong Kong’s public, particularly those who see themselves as localists.

Regardless of how extensive corruption has become in the upper echelons of Hong Kong’s government, or whether it is still restricted to a few “bad apples,” it seems that legal forms of collusion between government and business have become endemic and are increasing the risks to governance for post-colonial Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region of China, expiry date 2047. It seems very likely that the damages done to Hong Kong society in general and the less advantaged in particular by policy choices driven by legal collusion greatly exceed those resulting from acts of illegal corruption by individual leaders.

Conclusion

Government leaders in colonial Hong Kong, I have argued, diagnosed the problem as entangled with the willingness of Chinese migrants to accept and accommodate themselves to graft. They also suggested that the most direct prescription for improvement could be seen as restricting the bureaucratic discretion of junior officers. This can be seen as formalizing governmental informality with regard to rules and procedures in agencies like the Marine Department, the Housing Department, and the Police. Harsher punishment of corrupt practices and more effective independent supervision were achieved through the creation of the ICAC, which cut through the Gordian knot of widespread corruption (see Smart 2006 for the use of this metaphor in bureaucratic discussions of the squatter problem in 1950s Hong Kong).

Interventions that made it possible for such rapid progress in anti-corruption after 1972 included reducing the temptation to extort for government officers. This altered the environment in which they operated and can be seen as changing the cost/benefit calculations for officers. Anti-corruption also brought into existence a strong independent agency, reporting directly to the governor. ICAC was intended to be headed by retired or external civil servants who would have no need to curry favor with their future supervisors or to protect themselves from revelations of their own past involvement in practices like corruption “syndicates,” where all were expected to take a share of the “dirty” proceeds to prevent them from informing. Arguably just as important, however, because it has not received as much attention in the literature that attempts to explain Hong Kong’s successes, is what this article has focused on: curbing discretion.

No government can operate without some degree of discretion, because rules can never specify what to do in the unpredictable complexities of daily events. Administrators, like judges, must operate on the basis of judgments about what is best to do when there is no obvious choice presenting itself, when some kind of balance must be made between conflicting demands. What is possible, however, is to move the locus of such discretion farther up the bureaucratic hierarchy, and this is what happened in Hong Kong after 1972. It clearly had many positive outcomes, reducing the weight of petty extortion on Hong Kong’s people, helping to restore a degree of public trust in the colonial government, and creating a reputation for the reliable rule of law. All this helped to make Hong Kong one of the world’s most important financial centers (Smart 1997). However, it also created a situation where it became more difficult for street-level bureaucrats to respond individually in creative ways to the situations of people making a living in ways that broke the rules in the informal economy. It also created a gap between state and society wherein the practices of everyday sociality (e.g., paying the bill for a meal shared with a government officer) had to be set aside for fear of breaking anti-bribery rules. Osburg (2018) illustrates some of the social challenges of the emergence of this kind of situation in China’s contemporary anti-corruption campaign.

The particular kinds of anti-corruption interventions may also have helped to set the scene for the emergence of spectacular corruption scandals at the very top of the government hierarchy. My argument is not that stopping the petty corruption at the bottom of the bureaucracy pushed it upward, like squeezing a balloon. Rather it is that the new environment produced by the ICAC, the new rules of the game it fostered, altered cost/benefit calculations. If you are going to chance engaging in corrupt behavior, it had better be worth it. Reducing discretion at the bottom of the ranks means that lower-level officials do not usually have lucrative opportunities to engage in corruption. The more fundamental problem besetting contemporary Hong Kong, though, is not illegal corruption but (mostly) legal collusion. Here the environment of increased dependence by Hong Kong on Beijing has had unintended results for the Chinese Communist Party as well as for everyone in the Special Administrative Region. The resurgence of corruption in Hong Kong reflects how programs to change the rules of the game “unfold, materialize, or fail in unexpected ways” (Gabrys 2014:45). If future declassified government documents retain their frank and insightful qualities, once they are released, it will be fascinating to see how the “conventional studies” and institutional design efforts of the ICAC have perceived and responded to the influence of Beijing in post-1997 Hong Kong.

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Thinking with (Il)legality
The Ethics of Living with Bonanzas

by Diana Bocarejo

By thinking with (il)legality, I show the everyday rhythms and tropes of cultivation and mule driving through which peasants explain their engagements with different legal and illegal economies (marijuana, coca, and tourism) on a coastal mountainside in Colombia. I explore how peasants engage in ethical deliberations drawn from everyday practices through which they try to live “the best possible life” in very volatile contexts, while also providing a trenchant critique of the state, legality, and corruption. In this community, the talk about and pragmatic use of (il)legality and corruption are full of judgments about the right, the good, and the decent, or at least “the better than.” I analyze how law and electoral politics, the state and the judiciary, are not where peasants chiefly look for their theories of right and wrong. Peasants perceive corruption as practices shaped within the law, especially when the law does not comply with the legitimate claims of fairness or justice. Illegality may be an unexpected consequence of otherwise ethical judgments, but corruption, in contrast, is not redeemable. The distance that campesinos feel from corruption is not a triumphalist account of their ethical authority but instead marks the impossibility of their inclusion in either petty clientelism or urban middle-class anti-corruption platforms.

In this article, I explore how peasants engage in ethical deliberations drawn from the everyday practices through which they try to live “the best possible life” in the volatile contexts of legal and illegal economies, while also providing a trenchant critique of the state, legality, and corruption. I begin by showing how the attempt to live the best possible life— or “to avoid giving yourself a bad life” (vivir la mejor posible o no darse mala vida), as the locals would phrase it—comprises decisions as to what types of labor campesinos perform within the possibilities of each bonanza and also practices of care that involve protection, personal caution, and the safekeeping of community work. From what they state as their participation in bonanzas “as peasants,” most campesinos have defined the fate of their families and their place in the region by avoiding what they conceive as the greed, ambition, and risk of managing cocaine laboratories or engaging closely with the mafia or paramilitary organizations in charge of the local trades. In sum, I study ethics as it emerges from the lived experiences of peasants as immanent practices of everyday life that are configured through much more than only tacit competences (Keane 2010:82). These practices include deliberation, dispute, and judgment in an everyday life marked by different threats (Pandolfo 2007; Venkat 2017). The most recent memories about threats were those experienced in the Giraldo years, a period named for the paramilitary commander who managed coca production and whose persona vividly illuminates the contours of corruption.

In the second section of this article, I trace how peasants’ thoughts regarding the ethics of living within bonanzas are far from inspired by the morality of the law. What is legal “is not always broadly regarded in society as moral and legitimate
and what is illegal as immoral and illegitimate” (Pardo 2004:5). Hence, although in secular contexts the subject of ethics is ideally connected to the law (Keane 2010), peasants claim that, for them, what is lawful and legal is opportunistic, as the state apparatus mainly legalizes what is convenient only for those involved with or in close relation to state bureaucracies and politics. What is telling in peasants’ judgments is how state corruption is always the epicenter of illegality, but not every engagement with illegality is corruption. Hence, what I stress is that peasants think with (il)legality, both legality and illegality, through grounded ethical experiences that do not presuppose a local “culture of corruption” (Smith 2007).

I am aware of the dangers involved in discussions on morality when it is addressed as a universalist liberal rhetoric; as many authors argue, morality could be used to obscure power or to uncritically simplify contexts that do not conform to the liberal imagination (De Sardan 1999; Visvanathan Sethi 1998). Although these dangers ought to be addressed, (il)legality and corruption are folk categories that are far from being ethnically neutral. Talk of illegality and corruption is full of judgments about the right, the good, and the decent, or at least “the better than,” and that is why I show how thinking with (il)legality and corruption through peasants’ pragmatic uses (Gupta 1995; Mazzarella 2006; Muir 2016) also includes addressing ethical practices and the deliberations and justifications about them.2

Broadly, I argue that thinking about ethics from situated experiences is, explicitly or implicitly, decisive for understanding politics in contexts in which “ethical concerns have at times helped spawn new forms of governance such as truth and reconciliation commissions, novel auditory practices against corruption and social networks” (Mahmood and Maurer 2008) or in evaluations about public secularism, humanitarianism, public health, and religious revivalist social movements (Biehl 2007; Fassin 2014; Pandolfo 2007). In my analysis, peasants use ethical reasoning to show that marginality and the state are co-constitutive of one another, rather than marginality being the absence of the state, as many truisms would dictate. Ethical reasoning also points to how the state is locally constructed not only through illegal economies but also within the unethical enactments of corruption. The distance campesinos feel from corruption is not a triumphalist account of their ethical authority but instead marks the impossibility of their inclusion in either petty clientelism or urban middle-class anti-corruption platforms.

As a short discussion on methodology, just as ethical judgments may be “immediate (doing the right thing while drawing on what is at hand) and retrospective (acknowledging what has been done for what it was and is)” (Lambek 2010:43), ¿Si le dijeran! is a mode of sharing a story, immediate and retrospective, that is relevant to me, as I have had the opportunity to return to work in the same place and with the same people I worked with while I was an undergraduate student of anthropology in 1999. Back then, I did not do fieldwork directly in the Vereda but traversed it several times on my way up the mountain with tourists on a 3-day walk up to the archaeological park of Ciudad Perdida. Many years later, in 2015, I went to work in the Vereda, sharing daily routines with peasants, talking to them, and engaging in their daily rhythms, which mainly involved tourism (seeing mules being loaded, observing people getting ready to pick up tourists or cooking for tourists, hearing presentations for tourists about the history of the place, and also following the work around the small cultivated areas). I attempt to seriously engage with and explore the relations, terms, idioms, and ways in which peasants talk, think, and theorize about and with (il)legality and corruption.1 I include many remarks that I heard, practices that I saw, and direct responses to my queries. In everyday conversations, as well as in formal interviews, mules were an important part of the stories. Through them, peasants explain the history not only of the place but also of their lives.

Ethics of Enduring Bonanzas as Campesinos

The histories of mule trains show the cycles of bonanzas and the changes in people’s trades and lives. As Lalo, a well-known arriero4 explains, mules have always been “the raw material for the peasantry, guaranteeing movement since the region was settled” (fig. 1). Mule trains, of course, differ. Peasants talk about the differences in cultivating marijuana, coca, corn, or beans and the differences in packing chemicals, coca paste, or tourists’ backpacks, and they also talk about the different types of work available in each bonanza. Peasants have many anecdotes about the marijuana days, stories about the work of mules and

1. In existing compilations on the anthropology of corruption, there is a shared interest in challenging the idea of corruption as “a category of thought and organizing principle, and to examine its political and cultural implications” (Shore and Haller 2005). Along those lines, some authors have tried to understand ordinary forms of sociality and how certain practices may or may not be addressed as illegal or corrupt (Osburg 2018; see Yang 1994 for discussions on kinship and gift exchange). For some, even those practices judged as corrupt may have their own morality, at least in the eyes of the local public (Pardo 2004; Shore and Haller 2005; Torsello and Vernard 2016). Contemporary contributions to an anthropology of ethics have provided crucial understandings on the modes of subjectivation through which people relate, aspire, justify, or judge existing forms of government, legality, or corruption.

2. The pragmatics of the use of corruption have been stressed in recent anthropological contributions. For example, Muir’s work focuses on the moral sensibilities indexed by corruption in postcrisis Buenos Aires as “an evaluative rather than a normative analytic that inheres within and orients particular practices as well as discourses about those practices” (Muir 2016:132). Mazzarella (2006) explores how discourses of corruption, probity, concealment, and transparency are constitutive of an ideological formation addressed as e-governance.

3. For a thorough discussion, see Trouillot’s (2003) arguments on the epistemological status of the native voice, and also see Beckett 2017.

4. Arrieros are mule drivers, and in Colombian history, they constitute an important symbol that represents many of the country’s internal settlement processes.
arrieros traversing the mountain of the Sierra or the forests and sands of the Parque Tayrona. They explain the skills learned and mastered to transport corn, pumpkin, plantain, manioc, and beans, the strength required to carry "the gorgeous oak, cedar, and laurel timber," and the nimble packing of mule loads of chemicals (for coca production) and, more recently, tourists’ backpacks. In the coca times, "We moved big mounds of salt, and loads of gasoline, acid and soda. That was really tough, with the mules loaded up!"

Bonanzas entail much more than sudden economic rushes of wealth or "good fortune." The localized meanings of bonanzas convey histories of abundance and unruliness against an uncanny background of both economic growth and social ruination. As Ricardo, an expert arriero who is in his fifties and who has worked in the three different bonanzas, explains: "If you look around, its not like things have really changed or progressed much since the marijuana boom, although things are calmer now, that has changed." In fact, Vereda Honduras is a mountainous place with dispersed land plots and peasant houses, where mobility is difficult because of the distance between the houses and the steepness and the roughness of the foot and mule paths. There is only a small elementary school and a couple of local stores along the paths, which are mainly for tourists, and the closest small town (el Mamey, known as Machete Pelao) is 2 to 4 hours away depending on where people live. Bonanzas came along with mafias of marijuana merchants in the 1970s and a highly structured paramilitary operation around the business of coca in the following decades, with which peasants had to negotiate in order to sustain the incipient forms of tourism until the demobilization of Hernán Giraldo, the region’s most important paramilitary commander, in 2007. Within the perils of such volatile contexts, peasant subjects also differ. Peasants make a first distinction between those who were born in the mountains or chose to settle there and those who have come and gone with the rise and decline of bonanzas. But the most profound distinction is exemplified in the recurrent figure of mules. In Vereda Honduras, "not every person looks the same," declares Ricardo.

I once had a mule named La loca ("the crazy one"). She was like one of those people who are just a pretty face. There are people like that, though I don’t mean to offend anyone. That’s just how it is. We come to this planet, we’re born on this planet, and you have to be good for something on this planet, and not for something bad. If you’re born to do bad things, then really you’re not doing anything.

Ricardo’s account goes beyond comparing the beauty of mules and people. What Ricardo states as “being useful for something” and “not doing harm” is an idiom constantly used to refer to the line between doing good or bad while actively working and living through bonanzas. Most local inhabitants of the rural hillside area have occupied the role of peasants in

5. The Parque Tayrona is around 15,000 hectares in extension (3,000 of marine area) and is one of the most visited parks in Colombia. It is located in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta on the Caribbean coast.
bonanzas. “Peasant practices,” as they explain, include cultivating, packing and moving the mules (arriar), and guiding tours, and these contrast with other highly contested activities characterized as having higher profits and risks as well as greater negative repercussions. Such activities include managing laboratories for making coca paste, getting involved in drug commercialization or in the militias that guard illicit economies, and also owning the accommodation infrastructure for tourists, which only a few people can monopolize and which has grown in ways that defy the relationships of care for water and land that characterize communal supply management.

As peasants explain, engaging in bonanzas “like campesinos” entails learning how to have “good judgment” (un buen juicio como campesino) given the circumstances, especially violent ones, and knowing how to move and how to react. Such buen juicio is shaped through an ordinary life lived and molded by everyday violence, which has meant the emergence of an ordinary ethics within illegal and legal economies. While walking very steep mule paths with William, who was checking on his two cows, I listened as he explained.

I’ve really made an effort so that my son will not have to live this kind of life. In those days, there was a lot of danger because of marijuana and coca. Sometimes people were killed, and sometimes I passed by dead bodies alongside the trail, and I would just pass by to the other side and so would the mule. I would say to myself “I’ll just keep on my way, cross to the other side of the trail and come and go”. . . . We were always told to do good and not to harm anyone and I have tried to stick to that.

William and his close friend and neighbor, Lalo, illustrate the expertise of a generation whose parents worked with agriculture and marijuana and who then lived through the strong consolidation of coca and paramilitary rule in their youth. They are now in their mid-thirties and have learned how to live, work, and help their families from an early age. William and Lalo began their careers as arrieros and now work as tourist guides; William is also an expert logger. William and his close friend and neighbor, Lalo, illustrate the expertise of a generation whose parents worked with agriculture and marijuana and who then lived through the strong consolidation of coca and paramilitary rule in their youth. They are now in their mid-thirties and have learned how to live, work, and help their families from an early age. William and Lalo began their careers as arrieros and now work as tourist guides; William is also an expert logger. William and his close friend and neighbor, Lalo, illustrate the expertise of a generation whose parents worked with agriculture and marijuana and who then lived through the strong consolidation of coca and paramilitary rule in their youth. They are now in their mid-thirties and have learned how to live, work, and help their families from an early age. William and Lalo began their careers as arrieros and now work as tourist guides; William is also an expert logger. William and Lalo began their careers as arrieros and now work as tourist guides; William is also an expert logger. William and Lalo began their careers as arrieros and now work as tourist guides; William is also an expert logger.

William and Lalo’s account, their “way of living” (forma de vida y de vivir) arises from implicit notions of care and also from explicit warnings from parents and friends. To me, this ethics of living within illegal and legal economies has shaped “active competences” through everyday practices (Faubion 2011). While growing up, William, Lalo, and most of the campesinos learned how to “mind their own business,” not be rude with the local paramilitary powers, abstain from excess drinking, avoid too much socialization with Giraldo’s men, save money to help their families, and never get too greedy in each bonanza.

This ethics also means, within the current tourist economy, creating alliances and collaborating, so that guides and arrieros, in particular, have developed interesting ways of defining shifts in their community. William explains: “There are 41 families, and each family works once every 40 days. So today, for example, it’s the turn of the woman who’s here, and she works today, and tomorrow it’s Gabriel’s turn, and he works and then has to wait again.” Lalo in turn states, “Thank God that, at this stage in tourism, the arrieros are the most organized. They respect other people’s shifts, and they sometimes work together when they don’t have mules, like if someone says to me, for example, ‘Lalo, I need four more mules.’” What is an ethical judgment is not only about respecting those turns but also about understanding that, even if the tourist bonanza, as with many other bonanzas, is not driven by peasants, they have to make serious and active judgments about their form of engagement. In fact, they actively ask tourist companies to respect tour guide shifts, they formed the association of arriería, and now they await with suspicion to see whether the rumors about the entrance of the immense tourist company Aviatour into the local economy are real.

Just as recent contributions have stated, we are facing a theoretical turning point by “thinking of the ethical as made up of judgments we arrive at when we stand away from our ordinary practices to that of thinking of the ethical as a dimension of everyday life” (Das 2012:134; see also Keane 2010; Lambek 2010). ¡Si le dijera! points precisely to the connection between ethics and the staggering “normality” of everyday life within bonanzas. Normality entails, for instance, that when peasants are asked about their day-to-day work in their life trajectories,
they openly include both legal and illegal economies in their narratives. José, who is now in his fifties and is well known in the area as a trabajador del campo, states that he loves “scraping coca leaves, treading on the leaves, stomping on the leaves, working in the laboratories, using a machete, cleaning the crops, fumigating crops, planting beans, manioc, plantain. I really like farming and mules. I love it! . . . But us campe- 
sinos are taken advantage of, we’re not worth much in this country.”

Normality, however, does not mean a lack of moral evaluations of bonanzas. On the one hand, there is a shared reflexive statement, in which peasants acknowledge that, even in the remoteness of the Vereda, they are part of global economies (of marijuana, coca, and tourism) but also that they belong to the lowest rung of the hierarchy. As they explain, “we benefit the least from economic transactions but take the most blame.” Their judgments about “peasant practices” draw upon an evaluation of the “forms of sociality and new kinds of markets” available in each bonanza (Povinelli 2011:17). Many authors have studied the forms of sociality emerging from unregulated economies. For instance, in her analysis of contraband in the Chad Basin, Roitman shows how “thinking and enacting certain ways of accumulating as well as certain ways of thinking about and sanctioning specific forms of wealth” may be described as legitimate, rational, or reasonable behavior (Roitman 2006:249). In the Vereda Honduras, what is surprising is that, in spite of the normality of (il)legal economies, there is an ethical valuation and reflexivity regarding what practices are legitimate or licit. Hence, not every legitimate or rational decision that explains the normality of coca, marijuana production, or tourism is necessarily thought of as licit, legitimate, or ethical.

The ethical evaluations of (il)legal economies, as I have explained, refer to peasants’ involvement in the mafia-controlled local economies and the links these mafias have to corruption. In particular, these links refer to the expansion and profound territorially power of the paramilitaries in control of the coca trade. For campesinos, the condition of possibility for Hernan Girado’s power was corruption, but he also became its main engine. Giraldo not only managed the coca trade but built an entire militia, allied himself with politicians and the military, and determined regional and political elections. He was the ruling force. He was known as the “patrón,” and he decided who lived and who died. People recount the atrocities he committed, including his now well-known taste for young virgin girls (Wills et al. 2011). As patrón, he delivered goods and services that, in the liberal imagination, the state should deliver. He approved land occupations by landless people, organized health brigades, and organized the community action committees (juntas de acción comunal) that were able, for example, to keep the roads passable. He was a crucial node in the network of favors that built the intricate webs of corruption throughout the region. In spite of all the violence he generated, Girardo emerges in some narratives in the unlikely role of having made corruption, in a few instances, something “useful” for local in-

habitants. “He who prays and sins breaks even,” explains Alonso, using an expression common in Colombia. He explains that “there was a lot of corruption in the government, and Hernán claimed a part of it, but he also carried out projects which the government did not directly or at least voluntarily help to fund, as the money came via corruption.” It is remarkable that the paramilitary commander carried out state-like actions; people recall, for instance, how Girado “talked to the community about building a bridge, for example, a certain road, and each person gave an amount, and he put in the rest.” In contrast to Alfonso’s views, however, for most campesinos—even if they recognize such “necessary interventions”—Girado is far from “breaking even” given all of the atrocities that he committed and the ways in which his power fueled the corruption of the state. Local corruption in the state administrative region of Magdalena, of which the Vereda Honduras is part, is a well known “secret” (secreto a voces), as is the close partnership between politicians, paramilitaries, the military, and state officials.

Corruption, in turn, is the idiom used by locals to explain why people do not believe in the power of the ballot box. For the most part, peasants only voted when Girado “told” them to do so, and in contrast to nearby villages that sometimes obtain benefits during elections, such as soccer uniforms or an electric transformer, they do not even receive visits from politicians in Vereda Honduras, much less access to electricity. Peasants may have been constantly called “illegal” for entering unregulated economies, but corruption is something that is not even within their reach. As William explains,

I don’t think anyone here is corrupt, because nobody here has managed government money or received anything from them. What you hear about more are the traditional families in Santa Marta who are always the ones who have had political power and have taken public money. They’ve always been involved with the government, and that’s why they manage the money. You can really see the backward effect of this in Santa Marta [the state capital of Magdalena].

¡Si le dijera!—the distance from “corruption,” as a folk category, is based on the claim that campesinos have been excluded from urban middle-class anti-corruption crusades (for Colombia, see Isaza 2011; for Argentina, see Muir 2016). Also, the distance campesinos feel from corruption, in contrast with what is seen in many other rural and urban areas, is because they have not been included within the petty forms of clientelism and corruption and have not received the favors of gomonales, local politicians, and elites (Ansell 2018; Poole 2004). Here, peasants do not expect to receive some of the “state appropriation of resources” managed locally by elites. They simply do not hope that “some of the benefits of this appropriation will spill over to the rest of the local population” (Lomnitz 1995:40). In contrast to many other contexts in Colombia, Latin America, and beyond, corruption here is not a form of “extended cargo-system.”

In sum, ethical evaluations and practices are part of the everyday engagements of campesinos with illegal bonanzas, so
that “not everything goes,” even within the normality of paramilitary mafias. As I will show in what follows, there are different ethical registers between illegality and corruption given the externality felt from the latter. The law’s standing within such discussions is even more confounding—“if only I told you!”—as peasants make only a first-cut ethical distinction, as opposed to a definite one, between legal and illegal bonanzas (following official state law). Here, campesinos do not take the law as “fixed,” and they do not see it as an a priori legitimate set of discourses and practices.

State Corruption, the Randomness of Legality, and the Perils of “Playing with Fire”

On an ordinary working day on the farm, while having his morning coffee, William started to worry about his mule Chispa (Spark). “Chispa is crazy,” he told me, “I heard her disturbing the cattle again at dawn. She likes to run like a crazy animal! Last week she broke two fences. She is young, but I hope she gets better and stops being wayward (atravesada).” He continued.

You know, a mule is a confident and intelligent animal. Intelligent because she will walk up to an overflowing creek but will never go in. She’ll have a sniff and if she sees that she can’t go in the water, she does not take the risk. She refuses and won’t go in. And if she gets in, it is only because you force her to, really force her to do so. I remember that one of my mules, Catapiló [named after Caterpillar machines], would start to walk slowly some nights and cautiously, even crouching down. Because he knew when tigers were walking by the trails. You know it’s like people. There are those who are sharp, some of us more or less, and others stupid, and it’s the same with mules.

For local inhabitants, there are a few neighbors who constantly push their actions to the limit and even behave like fools given the violent context of the region, just as with mules “when you get to an overflowing creek you would be really stupid to get in.” Just like the mule Chispa, Alirio and Alfonso have always been wayward “atravesados.” William sighs, smiles, and continues. “There are many moments, many stories.” And he recalled a story “during the marijuana bonanza when Ricardo [a close neighbor] lent a mule to a friend of his and then that friend got into a dispute with Alirio, who tried to kill him, and he mistakenly shot Ricardo’s mule! Alirio has always been explosive, very clever with business and a great worker, but he likes playing with fire.”

These few bold neighbors are seen as transgressors of the ethical boundaries of “peasant practices” because they have put their own lives and even their family’s lives in danger by engaging in close economic and social relations with paramilitaries or drug dealers, and because they have abused or are overexploiting the land and water for marijuana or coca growing and for tourism. As many authors have argued, moral standings derive not only from the experience of externality of everyday engagements with one’s own actions but also from the relationships with people and, in many contexts, with many other companions (including animals, crops, land, and water). Such externality, as Keane argues (2010), allows (but does not determine) a sharpening of ethical awareness. Our ethical lives are entangled and, as Al-Mohannad (2013) states, “enmeshed into the lives of others and this enmeshment indicates not only that our existential co-ordinates are ex-centric, but so too our ethical co-ordinates and responsibilities.” The limits drawn between what is acceptable and unacceptable in illegal and legal economies, and moreover the question of living the best life possible within what is available, also include judgments about the ways in which the landscape is transformed and about human pressures put on the land, forests, and water.

Those neighbors who are said to be prone to boasting are said to live on the tightrope between “good and bad,” always known to take risks. They also tend to avoid working in local coops or being part of other forms of community organization. People refer to Alirio and Alfonso, the two figures William mentioned, as personifying such sharp, bold, cunning, and even crafty qualities. They have not only cultivated coca but also built and run labs for coca paste, have played a more active role in drug commercialization, and own the few tourist lodges in the area (trying constantly to expand because of their greed). They also, not surprisingly, cannot stand each other and actively compete for higher profits in bonanza after bonanza. As is the case with every other local inhabitant, they deeply care for their families, but they also share the desire for money, enjoy showing off, and actively mobilize their saints, balms, protective stones, or other amulets to guard them from “the envy of forceful competitors.” Carrying amulets, for Alirio and his neighbors, is a reminder of the persona he has constructed for himself; the amulets “enclose my past, the taste for looting [archaeological sites] and what I have learned for protection.” These protections are crucial, as Alirio and Alfonso explain how, for the most part, their difficulties have been the result of envy. Alfonso, for instance, recalls how his coca production started to run out because of the glyphosate-spraying airplanes, but mainly he remembers how “my coca started to dry out all by itself. I think it was because of envy. Because it...
was drying out, dying.” In fact, what they see as the consequence of envy is, for most neighbors, actually the result of their transgression of campesino practices. Many episodes full of dramatic and painful experiences—as in the case of Alfonso, who has lost two of his sons—are, for most campesinos, tough life lessons that are the result of not having learned the dangers of playing with fire (fig. 2).

One of the most recent episodes, commented on in the past few years, was the closure of Alfonso and Alirio’s “coca factories” (factorías turísticas). These factorías were used to show tourists the chemical process of coca production but were not used to process coca paste, as they had been in the past. Last year, this anecdote was a recurring story in my conversations with peasants, who incorporated a large amount of personal humor in the tale. In an afternoon conversation, William, Lalo, and Sandra (William’s wife) explained.

William. Alirio appeared in an international journal, he was named Don Vicente.

Lalo. At least he was not so dumb as to give his name! [Laughs] The article was called “Don Vicente: The Coca Teacher.”

Sandra. The journalist tricked him. He appeared to be just another tourist and paid for the tour. Factorías were very well known here, although only Alfonso and Alirio had them.

William. It was very good business. Everybody benefited from it, because even the guide got a share. If a tourist paid 50,000 pesos [approximately US$20], half was for the owner and half for the guide.

Lalo. So the journalist did the tour, and then he published an article. I think factorías were educational, because a tourist who sees all the crap that is in coca doesn’t feel like doing it again!

William. So helicopters came by because the DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency] was looking for him, and everything in the factorías got burnt. He managed to get out of the situation after a few days, but it was tough on the old guy.

Lalo. They don’t learn. Look at everything that’s happened to them. [William and Sandra sigh and nod their heads in agreement.]

I heard many different accounts of this impasse, but the moral of the stories was always the same. It stated something along these lines: Alirio and Alfonso have always had strong personalities, they are known “to play with fire,” and they have gotten burnt several times. Like a stubborn mule, they have not even learned “through pain” (ni a los golpes). Although the narratives of such anecdotes were, as usual, a mixture of humor and terror, there was no heroism in their account. This
was an example of how certain modes of engaging in bonanzas bring harm and bitter disappointment and a way of acknowledging the necessity of controlling greed and ambition.

In turn, what was illuminating about talking to Alirio and Alfonso was the way in which they approached legality and illegality, an approach that, although shared by most campesinos, was told in a particularly clear and blunt manner. Such an approach, in turn, became crucial for understanding the talk of corruption in the area. There is randomness in what people see as illegal, and Alirio states that “the laws of the government are the most illegal.”

If you’re working and you’re giving money to that state, then it is legal. If you’re not paying, then it’s illegal and that’s how it is. If someone is poking around with a stick in the rocks looking for gold, the government says that’s illegal, but if a company comes and pays a tax to the government then it’s like pull down all those rocks, that’s legal! It is the same with looting [guaquear]. Before it was free, but in the end the government looked for a way to charge for a license, and anyone who wanted to loot had to go and buy the license to look for gold or stones. Then they turned around and said this was national heritage and illegal, even though the employees themselves of the Ministry of Environment were looters. I mean, what does an archeologist do? Loot! Looting with the government’s permission. Like that guy, who is now even an ambassador.

Laws may be illegal—that is, unfair and unethical—as a certain practice, such as looting or mining, may be seen as illegal or legal depending on who is doing the job. The reference to mining is salient in this case because, as in many other parts of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, there are controversial mining economies in place, both legal and illegal. What Alirio is saying, and I believe this is a generalized peasant claim, is that illegality ought to be seen also through the lens of the ethical in order to judge where to draw the line with legality. Who is making the law? Who is profiting from it? And why is it that, within state legal enactments, those in a subaltern position seem to always lose? There is more to say than simply that illegal activities are rendered licit practices, permissible, or legitimate given the context in which they take place (Roitman 2006). There is always an important exercise of judgment to perform. On the one hand, when I asked Alirio if there was a parallel in the history of looting or mining to that of marijuana or coca, he stated,

For me, he who smokes does a really bad job, and he who consumes does a really bad job. For me, what’s legal is working without taking from others. He who doesn’t work doesn’t deserve help. He who’s into consuming drugs, beer, aguardiente [a local schnapps], doesn’t deserve help.

What is wrong in the history of marijuana or coca, for him and many others, is not its production but its consumption. However, the rest of Adan’s neighbors and the majority of peasants in the Vereda would add that it also depends on the type of work and overall engagement people have with its production. Following Alirio, campesinos share the perception that, when the state estimates that both marijuana and coca ought to be legal for medicinal purposes, then the rhetoric of illegality will “opportunistically” change. Given the randomness of what we may call legal or illegal, where does corruption stand? Alfonso states it clearly: “Corruption is within the norm, within the law for the benefit of others, that’s very clear.” Corruption relates to a network of favors linking “bigmen,” such as drug dealers or paramilitary bosses, with the police, politicians, and elites. Such networks are again forged within both legal and illegal activities. But if legality does not mean lack of corruption and is far from being addressed as ethical, what is the stance of the juridical in these discussions?

It has been argued that postcolonial countries, as well as those countries included in the first-world list as third-world countries, seem to make “a fetish of the rule of law, of its language and its practices, its ways and means” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006:vii). In many contexts, this is in fact the case, and as Gledhill (2004:176) has argued, in Latin America,”there is a strong impetus to make the rule of law work, not so much abstractly and universally, as substantively for those whom its perversion has repeatedly disempowered.” However, something else is occurring here. Peasants have been left out of the indulgences of multicultural rights and the progressive legal mechanisms of representation in place since the 1990s. There are at least three important mechanisms of participation and of political legibility that peasants have been unable to reach. First, throughout the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, as in many other areas of the country, some rural communities live in recognized national parks; however, only indigenous populations are actively included in the state public policies of “parks with the people.” Second, “the peasantry” is not addressed as an identity category or form of political subjectivity, which means that peasants’ claims to the land and their affects regarding their livelihoods and landscapes are seen as merely a functional and economic problem. Finally, they cannot use the mechanism of prior consultation in place for ethnic communities in their territories to demand consultation before any project is carried out (e.g., in tourism or mining). Hence, peasant farmers have been left out of what authors have called the politics of “ID-ology” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006).

The lack of an active use of legal mechanisms does not mean that peasants do not talk about the law. Peasants know the state legal sanctions that portray campesinos as environmental predators, as noncompetitive entrepreneurs, or as illegal subjects very well. Moreover, in the past several decades, their life as farmers has been a very solitary quest within the burgeoning treaties of free trade and the neoliberal language of productivity and competitiveness. Campesinos have never received a fair share of protection in law making and have experienced the worst consequences of different mafias’ law breaking (see Britto 2010; Partridge 1974). Hence, within such legal contexts, the ethical deliberations and practices that try to navigate the difficulties of each bonanza “in the best possible
way” are not rooted in the promise of the rule of law, nor are they tied to its functional use.

This is at the core of two different ethical registers: the selective closeness of campesinos with illegality, and the distance they experience from corruption. Even more telling—“¡si le dijera!”—is that the ethical distance felt from corruption is the same distance felt from the law. In fact, corruption is perceived as shaped within the law, especially when the law does not comply with the legitimate claims of fairness or social justice. Law configures the very nature of the trouble. Along those lines, what campesinos state—and this is clear in Alfonso’s and Alirio’s blunt judgments about corruption—is that Giraldo, or any other local boss in place throughout the bonanzas, did not provide a parallel legal system as it is commonly understood. They engaged actively in the processes of local state formation. In that sense, corruption is not a result of a parallel order, of a de facto “legal plurality,” but is embedded in the very same ways and means of state legal enactments. For instance, what appears as a loss of the state’s monopoly on violence, which falls into the hands of paramilitaries, is a way of reconstituting the state at its margins through the “army’s use of surveillance and state-sanctioned violence, including the use of proxy paramilitary forces” (Sanford 2004:256). In addition, even if the “state may not condone or officially regulate illicit activities, it still manages to extract tariffs from traffickers” (Sanford 2004:256).

What is reflected upon and locally theorized by peasants is how, beyond state absence, corruption always needs different sorts of active and not merely passive participation. This is a statement that articulates with the recurrent call within ethnographies of the state for studying the manner in which the state becomes “real and tangible through symbols, texts, and iconography . . . but also to move beyond the state’s own prose” and address “how it appears in everyday and localized forms” (Blom Hansen and Stepputat 2001:5; see also Sharma and Gupta 2006). A rich Colombian literature shows precisely the diverse and somehow contradictory ways in which the state is formed and imagined in different localities and regions, and it addresses the relevance of understanding violence, illicit economies, and different political subjectivities (Baud and Meertens 2006). A rich Colombian literature shows precisely the diverse and somehow contradictory ways in which the state is formed and imagined in different localities and regions, and it addresses the relevance of understanding violence, illicit economies, and different political subjectivities (Baud and Meertens 2004; Bolívar et al. 2006; Ramírez 2011; Sánchez 2014).7

The local state-formation approach also supposes transcending the idea of corruption as an external phenomenon that affects the economy of the state (Vargas Bernal and Duque Orozco 2014; see also Misas 2005). Moreover, it implies understanding corruption not as a political and social pathology but as a relationship that allows for “the constitution and re-constitution of the conditions of existence of society” (Up-rimny 1989:132)—in this case, of the conditions of inequality driven by a regional economic and political elite whose state benefits are not widely dispersed in peasant communities. What I seek to stress in this argument is that what is in place in the marginal and remote region of the Sierra Nevada is not a parallel order but a clear illumination of how the local state should be understood from within the complex disputes of illegal economies and the complex assemblages of politicians, state bureaucrats, police, armies, economic elites, and peasants. Another recurrent analysis, as stated by William, is that “the state is shaped in each bonanza, where illegality and corruption are always present, but not as much in agriculture, because it has never been part of a bonanza in the region. The state was shaped during the marijuana and coca years, and we might also say to a degree through the growth of tourism.”

As the above statement attests, peasant theories of corruption do not take the form of a juridical theory of illegality. Local inhabitants do not mobilize a rhetoric of rights, which in many other cases in Colombia and elsewhere in the world would entail, for example, discussing “the penal code in agonizing detail as they argue over the legality of the behavior of local officials who routinely ‘circumvent’ normal procedures” (Gupta 1995:375). Campesinos have mainly experienced the law through lawfare involving acts of coercion and even cruelty (Comaroff 2001). Local inhabitants feel the effects of these acts via the militarization of law enforcement in coca fumigations or state sanctions and see these actions as the strong arm of the law, but they never consider that they might be able to fight back through juridical mechanisms. Law and electoral politics, the state and the judiciary, are precisely not where peasants look to substantiate their theories of right and wrong.

Here the dialectic of law and disorder (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006) is always mediated by corruption and is, moreover, constitutive of both what the state judges to be legal and what it judges to be illegal. Campesinos do not repudiate the law, but they do not necessarily appropriate its languages and forms. Vernacular languages and “peasant practices” have defined a grounded relation and critique with (il)legality and corruption. In sum, in campesinos’ accounts, “it is not merely that criminal economies are often the most perfect expressions of the unfeigned principle of supply and demand, nor is it only

7. In Identidades Culturales y Formación del Estado en Colombia (2006), Ingrid Bolívar, Julio Arias, Daniel Serna, and María de la Luz Vásquez contest common sense notions that political subjectivity ought to be addressed only through the language of citizenship, so that racial, ethnic, and regional identities are seen as residues of traditional societies and as apolitical. In her work, María Clemencia Ramírez has shown the relevance of understanding the specific historical contexts that shape the relationship between the state and civil society, addressing the state’s contradictory approaches to local coca economies and how, in certain localities, such as in Putumayo, “the tension between the state and the guerrillas and between the people . . . makes the definition of this boundary even more complicated” (2011:213). Along those lines, the extensive work of authors like María Victoria Uribe, María Emma Wills, Alfonso Molano, Francisco Leal, Álvaro Camacho, Gonzalo Sánchez, Donny Meertens, and many others has shown the way the state has been formed within the complex mingling of violence, drugs, the war on drugs, and the guerrillas and paramilitaries.
that great profit is to be made in the interstices between legitimate and illegitimate commerce” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006:5); it is also that those neighbors that chose, through legal and illegal economies, to trespass certain ethical judgments have had to pay the price for it in their everyday lives (e.g., through sickness, bad luck, hate, and envy). As Lalo explains, “What I see when I go by there [Alfonso’s and Alirio’s houses] isn’t corruption but negativity, bitterness.” They do not epitomize corruption, and they are not corrupt. They vividly illustrate the dangers, risks, and price of playing with the randomness of legality and with the chance of widening the spectrum of everyday peasant practices. For campesinos, engaging in (il)legal economies both through peasant practices and through actions that go beyond them—¡si le dijera!—shows the enormous personal and communitary responsibility they have had in such complex contexts of lawfare and illegal mafias. In fact, the campesinos seem to be the only ones responsible for providing the “best possible life” for themselves and for guaranteeing even the possibility of being alive.

Final Remarks: Ethics and Politics

The ethical standing of illegal and legal economies appears to be the result of a strange mix of circumstances that shape the context of every bonanza. The state would be but a reflection of such a complex mix of circumstances if it were not for corruption. Illegality may be an unexpected consequence of otherwise ethical judgments that result from people’s everyday experiences with inequality, ambition, and forms of care or affect. In contrast, corruption is seen as preceding illegality, as something even external to it. Corruption, in contrast, is not redeemable. Following the peasant trope of thinking with mules, I conclude that corruption stands for all of the incorrect and negative characteristics associated with such animals: lack of loyalty, stubbornness, haughtiness, lack of restraint, rudeness, and recklessness (fig. 3). Moreover, as with mules, in spite of being a sterile hybrid, corruption is unceasingly socially reproduced over and over.

For some, corruption might be momentarily domesticated in order to bring forth a certain spark of goodness—as when local people mention the fact that the paramilitary commander Giraldo was able to use those corrupt strings to bring in certain goods and services (health brigades or machines to fix the road). But this is only an elusive and nonformative spark of goodness, far from evoking a positive ethical judgment. Corruption is known to be at the center of the social, economic, and political assemblages that unregulated bonanzas have brought into place (looting, marijuana, and coca). State institutionality is seen as the center from which corruption is enacted but not completely controlled, as it involves, in this case, a wide number of intricate relations that go beyond state institutions and include local elites, politicians, or paramilitary militias.

Peasants judge both legality and illegality within the contexts of their own (everyday) experiences. The different bonanzas that campesinos have lived and worked through, after all, have dealt

Figure 3. Stubborn mule, Vereda Honduras, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia. A color version of this figure is available online.
with issues of justice, fairness, and inequality in a more open manner than the state legal system or electoral politics. This again goes beyond showing the routinization of corruption and illegality in the art of government, because these experiences relate not only to moments in which the law is transgressed but also to the state-sanctioned lawfare against campesinos.

Understanding ethics within particular histories is also a crucial lesson for understanding politics. For some, the entanglement between the two is characterized as biopolitics that involve all “those powers that organize life, even the powers that differentially dispose lives to precarity as part of a broader management of populations” (Butler 2015:196). An increasing focus on ethical concerns has contributed to understanding the rise of new forms of governance and new forms of “intimacy, publicity, secrecy, and relationality” that do not merely comply with such biopolitics (Mahmood and Maurer 2008). What I believe is an important contribution to understanding everyday ethics, as in the case of campesinos in Vereda Honduras and many others, is that it is not a mere political stratum or illumination of the unconscious capillarity of power. As such, an ethics of living within bonanzas is not a reenactment or “the cynical playing out of strategies and interests in competitive games of power and prestige” (Lambe 2010:7).

Legality, illegality, and corruption are part of a political life framed within the intricacies of the everyday. They are folk categories used and shaped within the experiences of campesinos and the entrenched entanglements of state institutions, paramilitaries, and local elites. They are shaped in part by ethical judgments in which peasants evaluate their closeness to or distance from (il)legality) or corruption by discerning what to do and acknowledging what has been done. Such judgments are always unfolding in the ongoing history of campesinos. ¡Si le dijera! is thus also a story of what has not happened, a narrative that ends with the suspense of what might come to pass in the future with the tourist bonanza, or with another type of bonanza yet to come, and with the ongoing process of an ethics of living.

Finally, asking about the coupling of ethics and politics also means opening up the conception of “the political” in the midst of the desolation felt by electoral politics, in which peasants in this area not only do not trust but also do not commonly participate. Personal and community deliberations and practices regarding what to work on or how to care about family and neighbors become political practices due to their capacity to organize and direct the actions and expectations of campesinos who have, to a large extent, defined the fate of their place (e.g., how the Vereda never became an epicenter for coca labs; or how, even if there were cultivated areas of marijuana and coca, these never occupied a great expanse of the mountains; or why peasants still live with mules and forests instead of moving to the town). Hence, ¡si le dijera! will continue to provide a moment of thought about the astonishing stories that have shaped an ethics of living that illuminates not only the implications of lawfare, corruption, and (il)legality but also the active everyday political practices through which people endure and live the best possible life given astonishingly difficult circumstances.

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Corrupt, Abusive, and Legal: Italian Breaches of the Democratic Contract

by Italo Pardo

What corruption? In this article, I focus on corruption that does not break the law. I develop an ethnographically based analysis of the impact, on associated life, of governance that is both legal and received at the grassroots level as illegitimate and morally corrupt. Empirical evidence from Naples sheds light on the corrupting impact of ideologically biased governance that today, as in the past, responds to the selective interests and demands of small groups at the expense of the urban population. Critically, these processes take place in a national context marred by the progressive corruption of the basic democratic principle of unequivocal separation between the powers of the state and by repeated breaches in the democratic contract that engender erosion both of trust between citizenship and governance and of representative responsibility. Combined, these processes mark power without authority. They occur in a Group of Seven country that, for several years, has been ruled by a succession of unelected governments. In this scenario, I suggest, an anthropological analysis of local dynamics helps in grasping the sociological impact of processes that have broader significance and in addressing the question of what can be done to control and possibly prevent corruption that does not break the law.

In this article, I address the question, What corruption? Given that my work on corruption is a by-product of my interest in how dominant groups manage power and relate with the rest of society, my interest in corruption that breaks the law is secondary to my interest in corruption and abuses of power that do not break the law but do break citizens’ trust and often violate their rights, which is an issue that is further complicated by ad hoc changes that make legal what was illegal. Not easily or immediately identifiable, these abuses are received as morally reprehensible and illegitimate at the grassroots level, and they are most insidious and disruptive—perhaps more so than illegal corruption—because they enjoy or are made to enjoy the credentials of legality and cannot be punished.

Misuse of power breeds corruption and feeds on it. I recognize the methodological importance—in the sense of how and why I study corruption as an anthropologist—of paying attention to ordinary people’s views that certain actions taken by those in power are immoral and illegitimate. In the spirit of this special issue of *Current Anthropology*, which aims to “move across an array of theoretical and regional concerns to chart a set of problematics that will animate anthropological studies of corruption in the coming years” (quoted from the symposium organizers’ statement at http://www.wennergren.org/events/anthropology-corruption), I draw on my work to address the ramifications of legal corruption, abuses of power, manipulations of the law, or instrumental changes to it to study how citizens grow progressively disconnected from governance. Case material on the social production of mistrust will clarify how public opinion sees through the technical legality that hides misuses of power. I aim to illustrate the disruptive impact on the democratic contract of power that, although perfectly legal, lacks authority because, identified as corrupt, it lacks legitimacy—in the key Weberian sense.

**Corruptio Optimi Pessima: Contextual Framework**

Consistent with the principle of “heterogeneity of morality” (Lukes 1991, chap. 1), the occurrence, dynamics, extension and received (im)morality of corrupt practices are subject to

1. Since 1984, and throughout the 1990s and 2000s, I have conducted several 14–18-month fieldwork visits among ordinary people and elite groups in Naples and its province. In each case, in classic ethnographical fashion, arm-chair documentary research was followed by a systematic application in the field of participant observation and by the in-depth interviews and case studies of key people and events. I updated my ethnography through 3–4-month trips (the last one in 2015) and shorter visits to date. Updating research—both documentary research and research conducted in the field—continues regularly.

2. Throughout this article, I synthesize ethnographic examples. For reasons of space, I must refer the interested reader to my earlier works, which I cite at the appropriate places in the text, for more detailed, “thick” ethnographic material.

3. Translated from the Latin, this classic expression means “corruption of the best is the worst.”
graded—and socially and historically specific—interpretations of what is legitimate and what is not, what is moral and what is not (Pardo 2000, 2004b, 2004c). So, there is not—and probably there cannot be—one analytically useful definition of corruption. Certainly, there is not one in law. As has been vastly documented, certain aspects of corruption—to mention a few, bribery, extortion, tax evasion, pursuit of private interest in public office, and illicit exchanges of favors—recur across different societies. And yet, the absence of a comprehensive definition of corruption testifies to its elusiveness, which extends to the concept of abuse of power (Nastro 1998; Wedel 2012) and helps to explain why legal intervention is so often inadequate (D’Avino 2000; Melillo 2000; Miller 2000, 2004; Pardo 2004c). The ramifications are many and complex.

As a social anthropologist, I find it telling that, mirroring a worldwide pattern in the treatment of this topic; the extensive literature produced by sociologists and political scientists focuses on illegal corruption in Italian public life without truly addressing its "elusiveness" and largely underestimates the empirical—and theoretical—weight of corruption that does not fall into this category. As my informants in the judiciary point out, while extortion is easily proved, corruption that breaks the law is difficult to identify in the absence of "confessions" and, once identified, is not easily proved (D’Avino 2000; Maffei 2000; Melillo 2000; Miller 2000), principally because the parties involved are usually committed to secrecy. And yet, while corruption may thrive on secrecy (Nuijten and Anders 2007; Pardo 2004; Turner 2007), it "does pretty well on publicity too" (Parry 2000:37; Prato 2004). It certainly sells. Verbal casuistry aside, whether one chooses to call it sleaze or something else (Pardo 2017a), corruption sells newspapers, television programs, films, and books, and it nurtures all kinds of national and international organizations that regularly produce tables ranking countries on the basis of "corruption." Entire careers—journalistic, academic, judicial, and so on—have been built on riding institutional and on the attendant anti-corruption rhetoric (Schneider 2018), which can, of course, be used perversely to feed corruption (Harrison 2004, 2007; Pardo 2004c; Prato 2004; see also Bähr 2005; De Sardan 1999).

Political scandals may create moments of transparency (Smart 2018). On occasion, they may “clear the air.” However, when it comes to politically driven corruption scandals, things get complicated and muddled, offering new opportunities to the corrupt. This last point brings to the fore De Sardan’s pointed remark that corruption “is as frequently denounced in words as it is practiced in fact” (1999:29–30). It is graphically exemplified by the events surrounding the Italian scandal of the 1990s known as tangentopoli (literally, bribesville). Tangentopoli originated in Milan and spread throughout Italy; it had to do mostly with illegal party-funding and, critically, abuse of power in public office. Interestingly, however, once the “dust settled,” legislative changes were introduced that emasculated precisely the law on abuse of office. The tangentopoli scandal and its aftermath (Pardo 2004c) powerfully underpin the reflection that, as corruption pervades public debates over the quality and efficacy of governance, accusations of corruption become a powerful politicking tool. No matter that, as in the tangentopoli case, the resulting media hype makes a mockery of the principle that the accused is innocent until proved guilty. No matter that proportionally few convictions may be ensured, while the careers and reputations of the accused are destroyed. No matter that abuses of power are blatantly perpetrated. No matter that such hype invariably inflates corruption. Historical and current examples abound of crooked political competition where (often unproven) accusations of corruption serve the purpose of removing elite groups from power to the advantage of other elite groups.

Cultural relativism aside, corruption needs to be examined contextually and diachronically (Alatas 1968; Klaveren 1989; Lowenstein 1989), particularly because ideas of what constitutes corrupt behavior, the legal definition of corruption, and the deceipts of language by which corruption becomes routine change with place and time. The tangentopoli affair points to what Italian observers see as a “deep-seated moral question” that mars the “new” brooms (De Feo 2016; Di Feo 2008; Francesc 2016). Throughout tangentopoli and later, Italians were told that the mechanism of corruption, particularly in public life, becomes gridlocked when the new replaces the old. In reality, this proved to be far from the case.

Notwithstanding the “benefits” brought to those who abuse their office by the post-tangentopoli changes in the law (see n. 6), the claim that an application of “new politics” would foster important changes was proven to be empty by the “new” brooms’ actions and rhetoric of power. In time, many clean hands got dirty through involvement in the abuse of power, bribery, and corruption, as suggested by the new brooms-led


5. For example, Della Porta (1997), Levi and Nelken (1996), and Della Porta and Vannucci (1999, 2016).

6. In 1997, the law (Art. 323 of the criminal code) was modified (Law 234/16.07.1997) to make it de facto impossible to prosecute officers who abuse their power but do not cause financial damage to the institution in which they serve. As argued by jurists (Dalìa 2000; Miller 2004:62–65), the European Union–inspired Law 300/29.09.2000 has further weakened judicial action against this crime.

7. The Italian journalist Alfonso Ruffo (2000, 2011) has extensively commented, from an insider’s viewpoint, on the corrupt character of biased media campaigns.

8. Acquittal of the wrongly accused happens much later and usually fails to make the headlines, and reputations stay destroyed.

criminal corruption that, to cite a few cases, has allegedly marred the construction of the flood defence system in Venice (Ganz 2014), tainted the awarding of contracts for the Milan Expo (Biondani and Gatti 2014), led to the alliance of politicians and criminals to steal public funds in the so-called Mafia Capitale scandal (Semprini and Caprara 2015), compromised municipal employment in Tuscany (Marini 2016; see also Francese 2016), and, to move geographically closer to my ethnographic field, resulted in the botched environmental recovery of the former industrial site at Bagnoli,10 the failed construction of a gas network in the Naples Province (Pardo and Marotta 2017), and, of course, the world-famous Naples rubbish crisis (Pardo 2011). In this last case, following a 6-year-long judicial investigation and a parliamentary inquiry, 28 people were indicted for corruption, bribery, embezzlement of public funds, fraud, abuse of office, and omission of administrative control. The accused, who claimed innocence, included the “former” Communist president of the region, his two deputies, and the heads of the firms that contracted for the disposal of waste and the conversion of waste into energy. The central government and a local council were sentenced to pay damages to citizens for loss of quality of life and personal dignity. Thousands of similar civil suits were filed. Let us look a little more closely at what happened in those problematic years.

In the 1990s, only the large Communist Party, known as the PCI, and the tiny neofascist party, known as the MSI, were left untouched by the tangentopoli investigations.11 This anomaly was the direct product of another anomaly, seen by many as a highly problematic form of corruption of the democratic system. Taking over a key aspect of political competition, the judiciary emasculated political competition roughly and selectively. They led a witch-hunt that failed to deliver the convictions of many of those who were investigated and “found guilty” before trial (Chirico 2012).12

In Italian criminal law, the distinction between crimes of extortion and corruption in public life (Art. 317 and Art. 319, respectively) is insufficiently clear. In the case of extortion, an officer uses his power to extract money, documents, or services from a person. Liability lies squarely with the extortionist. In the case of corrupt practices, abuses of influence may mean that “gifts” or services are solicited as rewards for a favor, often consisting in speeding up or delaying proceedings or in the omission of an act. Given the difficulty of proving corruption, it is not surprising that many of the tangentopoli investigations never went to trial, because preliminary judgement (i.e., one of the guarantees for justice enshrined in Italian judicial proceedings) found the charges to be groundless or, more worryingly, based on the unproven accusations of informers (the so-called pentiti), as opposed to being based on proof acquired through hard police work of the kind gathered, for example, by Falcone and Borsellino in Sicily (Schneider 2018), Miller in Naples (Costagliola 1981; Miller 1981), and Miller, D’Avino, Frangliso, and D’Amato in the Naples region (Miller et al. 1993).

The tangentopoli investigations raised critical issues regarding the responsibility of the judiciary (Chiocci and Di Meo 2013; Miller 1999; Nastro 1998), and it cannot be said that justice was served. Later, the size of the fire beneath all that smoke became apparent. To keep it simple, out of the many thousand who were investigated, accused of corruption, tried by the media, and publicly disgraced, only 2,565 were tried in court. By 2000, 1,408 individuals had been found guilty, 790 had been acquitted, and 367 were still on trial. All were discredited and impoverished by the lengthy legal procedures and fees. A proper analysis of the human and financial costs belongs to a separate paper, based on observation, participation, direct testimony, and in-depth interviews. Here, I will only mention that these “costs,” extending to the families and friends of those who were falsely accused, led to several suicides. On the other hand, there were many who gained from inflating what Sharma (2018) calls the “chaos of corruption.” Having become national heroes who embodied, in the collective imagination, a new mani pulite (clean hands) era, several tangentopoli judges proceeded to resign from the judiciary, work for various political parties, serve in local administration or in government, and become accused of nepotism, clientelism, abuse of office, and moral corruption.13 However, as in the case of the “former” Communists,14 they were not always the beneficiaries of the “chaos” produced from the de facto elimination of political competition by spurious means.

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10. Bagnoli is an area of extraordinary natural beauty. There, a huge industrial site was built in 1910, which was later expanded and eventually abandoned in 1993, leaving a heavily polluted footprint. The still-incomplete recovery has become mired in a 25-year-long combination of administrative control. The accused, who claimed innocence, included the former industrial site at Bagnoli,10 the failed construction of a gas network in the Naples Province (Pardo and Marotta 2017), and, of course, the world-famous Naples rubbish crisis (Pardo 2011). In this last case, following a 6-year-long judicial investigation and a parliamentary inquiry, 28 people were indicted for corruption, bribery, embezzlement of public funds, fraud, abuse of office, and omission of administrative control. The accused, who claimed innocence, included the “former” Communist president of the region, his two deputies, and the heads of the firms that contracted for the disposal of waste and the conversion of waste into energy. The central government and a local council were sentenced to pay damages to citizens for loss of quality of life and personal dignity. Thousands of similar civil suits were filed. Let us look a little more closely at what happened in those problematic years.

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12. Under Italian law, citizens must be notified that they are under judicial investigation. When public figures are involved, these notifications, called Avvisi di Garanzia, are often leaked to the media.

13. See, e.g., the separate cases of Di Pietro and Ingopta (Schneider 2018) or De Magistris (Chiocci and Di Meo 2013; Chirico 2012; Demarco 2016; Pepino 2012).

14. By then, the PCI had been renamed Partito Democratico della Sinistra; its symbol was a yellow hammer and sickle on a red background at the bottom of an oak.
the structure and function of a democratic state, this project was formalized in the mid-1970s by a left-wing grouping of magistrates “denouncing the isolation of the system from society and proclaiming the non-neutrality of law and its administration” (Pitch 1983:122), which later expanded to include, today, a large proportion of the Italian judiciary. Recently, two of those magistrates have developed an interesting critical analysis of the politics and shallow theory that engendered this project (D’Angelo 2013; Pepino 2012). Outstanding events suggest that decision makers find such politicization convenient. As I have repeatedly warned, inflating corruption is a high-risk, corrupting game that, in a democracy, carries serious dangers. That large, politicized sections of the judiciary should play a key role in such a game, that they should embody the interference of one power of the democratic state in the functioning of the others, makes such dangers very real and very worrying.

The obvious questions arise, What corruption? What risks? What dangers? The short answers are, respectively, the corruption that breaks the law (of course, the question remains, What law?); the risk that inflating the prevalence of corruption and encouraging the attendant “dark fantasies” (Nugent 2018) might be corrupting, because to do so encourages the belief that “everyone is corrupt, so why shouldn’t I?”; and the danger that exaggerating the role of corruption in public life may irreparably destroy trust in the institutions of the democratic state. As we shall see in the Italian case, an informed, deep distrust of the people who represent the institutions of the democratic system may well turn into an equally deep distrust of the institutions tout court. Then, people may withdraw from the democratic process, which may suit the interests of some dominant group, but certainly not those of democracy.

Categorical assumptions are the scourge of the abstract approach. I suggest that, to understand the causes, effects, and ramifications of corruption of any kind, we need to address the empirically diversified motivations of those who undertake corrupt actions on their own initiative or because they believe, or are made to believe, that they have no alternative (Pardo 2004a; Parry 2000; Prato 2000, 2004), and we need to address how corruption is seen and talked about among the corrupt and among the rest of the population.

An Anthropologist Deals with the Question, What Corruption?

In the late 1990s, the anonymous reviewers of a research proposal that I submitted for funding and of a book that I submitted for publication argued that anthropologists could not study corruption empirically. As I went ahead with both projects, that argument proved to be groundless, both methodologically and analytically. Of course, the ethnographic study of corruption is complicated by the complexity and elusive nature of this phenomenon and by ethical concerns (e.g., confidentiality and anonymity). However, like me, a good number of experienced anthropologists have “come across” (Blundo 2007; Pardo 2004b, 2004c) and collected detailed material on illegal, legal, and “borderline” forms of corruption—the latter two proving, for obvious reasons, less difficult to study empirically and, in my view, much more interesting (Pardo 2000, 2004a). Useful information may well be a contested by-product of anthropological field research—the ethnographer “happens” to collect first-hand material on corrupt behaviors while performing fieldwork on other issues. Because illegal deals normally enjoy secrecy, it takes time for their ramifications and implications to become clear; it may be difficult to achieve sufficient insider status to meet the demands of the method of participation; and direct observation may not always be possible. However, background, consequential, and connected events can be recorded; good information can be found in officials’ reports, memoirs, and autobiographies; and it is highly productive to find out how people talk about their own corruption and that of others.

There are other good reasons why I should take only a secondary interest in corruption that breaks the law. For brevity, here I will simply refer to the implications of my earlier remark that Western legislation on corruption is generally weak and difficult to implement. As is well known, three key principles inform Western law. They are nullum crimen sine lege (without law there is no crime), nulla poena sine lege (without law there is no punishment), and nulla poena sine iudicio (without judgment there is no punishment). Taken together, these principles underlie judicial systems that are based on the certainty of the law and of the judgment. Their strength and that of their necessary interactions is undermined by the difficulty in defining corruption legally and by the consequent difficulties in producing unambiguous legislation and in applying and enforcing what law there is.

Significantly, in criminal codes across Europe, definitions remain limited (Nilsson 1994; Pardo 2015, 2017a), and often the word corruption is not used, with legislation instead addressing offenses such as bribery, purchase of votes, and the exercise of undue influence. As Prato (2004:79) aptly reminds us, such difficulty marred the preparatory document of the 19th Conference of the European Ministers of Justice and subsequent efforts to deal legally with this problem. That seminal document stated, “The notion of corruption is to be understood in its widest sense, extending to all fields of activities, both private and public, and to all persons invested with private or public functions who acquire an undue advantage linked to the exercise of such functions” (quoted in Nilsson 1994:90). Obvious and so far largely unanswered questions arise over how to define “undue”

15. Articles 98 and 101 of the Italian Constitution specifically forbid the judiciary to join political parties or hold political affiliation.

16. Some who believe that what they do or have done is not truly corrupt may be inclined to discuss their experiences, to “set the record straight.”

17. This conference was organized in 1993 by the Council of Europe on the fight against corruption.
advantage and to what extent an advantage is “undue.” Such inadequacy undergirds critical confusion in the definition of the culpability of those who take payment (in any form) and the culpability of those who offer or are forced to give it, often in defiance of the categories of “legal” and “illegal.” This raises important problems, because in many ethnographies the phenomenon of corruption has evolved from one where the dominant role was played by the bribe taker to one where the bribe giver is increasingly powerful and plays the role of “offeree.” Moreover, in the Italian case, the over-complicated legislative system fosters arbitrariness in the exercise of political and administrative power and in the use of public funds.

Mainstream anthropological literature has pointed to the analysis of the state through the study of everyday practices of local bureaucracy and politics (Humphrey and Sneath 2004; Pardo 1996, chap. 6; Prato 2000) and of the discursive construction of the state in public culture (Gupta 1995), and it has brought out the adverse implications of the pedagogic approach to legislation, as, for example, in the contemporary case of the Albanian Constitution (Prato 2011:140–143). In this context, we need to address the exact relationship of the protagonists in public life to formal law and to its production and perceived legitimacy (Pardo 2000, 2004c, 2017a). By definition, legislation tends to be informed by the interests and moral attitudes of decision makers. Such arbitrariness stresses the partiality and inherently contentious character of the law (Weber 1978, chap. 8) and raises critical questions regarding what morality need be significant to the making of the law. In recent years, serious issues have been raised (e.g., in the United States and the European Union) by legislative confusion—which, the judge Nordio (2015) notes, “makes of a man a thief”—and, equally important, by legislation that is received as illegitimate in the broader society, because it responds to the vested interests of the dominant elite at the expense of citizenship. This problematic of legislative arbitrariness also points to the contentions that the legal is not always just; that laws may be imperfect or ambiguous; that actions that are legal may be received as unethical, immoral, and illegitimate in the wider society; and that instrumental changes in the law may be resented as corrupt (Pardo 2004b, 2017a). The expression “corruption that does not break the law” is, therefore, only apparently paradoxical.

Actions that are not strictly legal may be seen as acceptable and morally justified, and they may therefore enjoy a legitimacy that extends to those who undertake them. While shunning the straightjacket of legal pluralism (Tamanaha 1993), I have drawn on European ethnographic evidence to argue in my work (Pardo 2000, 2004b, 2017a) that the production of the law must take into account the moralities and ethical principles that inform the definition of legitimacy at the grassroots level, for legislation that enjoys such legitimacy is authoritative—and therefore effective—legislation, and so is governance that abides by such legislation.

The present Italian situation encapsulates this problem as, alongside the aforementioned changes in the law, it is specifically marked by two important processes subsequent to the tangopoli affair. First, as I have mentioned, emphasis has shifted in legislation from those who accept bribes to those who offer them. Second, the dividing line between legitimate and illegitimate behavior, as well as that between the legal and the moral, has been subjected to continuous redefinition. Changes in the rulers’ rhetoric of what is morally appropriate have corresponded to changes in the rules. Friedrich (1989:19) has described this aspect of corruption as a “political pathology,” the most basic forms of which are the sale of the functions of the office and actions, or the omission of actions, that favor selected individuals and networked groups in exchange for money or other returns, such as favors, contracts for public work, or political support.

Like other anthropologists (Nugent 2018; Parry 2000; Prato 2004; Sharma 2018; Smart 2018), I am suspicious of the flimsy “pathology” metaphor. This scenario, I note, characterizes modern societies where politics and bureaucracy intermingle—a distinctive form of corruption of the democratic system whereby the formalism of bureaucracy itself works as a tool for consolidating personal power for gain. In the case in point, favored by administrative blindness and changes in the law, bureaucrats have become de facto politicians of low moral standing (Weber 1974:95), while, as Prato robustly put it, their peers “who maintain a moral standing of ‘impartiality’ are in fact regarded as ‘irresponsible politicians’” (2000:79).

Misgovernance in the Naples Region: A Diachronic Perspective

An important intellectual challenge in the study of contemporary society is posed by actors’ ability to negotiate objective conditions of restriction, by the conflicting ways in which citizenship and the processes of participation and belonging are approached from different viewpoints across society, and by the consequently widening gap between the rulers and the ruled. Aware that dominant politicians in the Naples region have long distrusted ordinary citizens while being observably obnoxious to their culture and way of life (Pardo 1996, 2001), I have investigated ethnographically the social, political, and economic impact of both stereotyping and policies that are received as immoral and illegitimate at the grassroots level.

This needs to be understood in the light of the long-established opinion among Italian elite groups and influential intellectuals that southerners are essentially corrupt and that southern society is undermined by a lack of civic sense (Putnam 1993) that interlocks with a deep-seated amorality (Banfield 1958). Over time, this seriously flawed opinion has evolved into a stereotype. In the process, it has helped to justify rulers’ politicking (Demarco 2009; Pardo 2011) and their defiance of fundamental principles of representation (Prato 2000) and entitlement, in the process corrupting politics (some say irrepairably) and harming ordinary people’s economic lives and citizenship.

Received at the grassroots level as a profoundly unfair fabrication, this stereotype has justified policies and legislation that have had punitive effects not so much on the widespread ac-
activities that take place outside the strictly defined boundaries of law but which cannot be described as criminal as on legitimate business, which through an entrenched ideological bias is treated as collectively corrupt and untrustworthy and is consequently excluded from contracting public work. At least since the reconstruction following the earthquake in the 1980s, this stereotype has periodically been cleverly spun, with the complicity of local rulers and notables, to give the more exciting media just enough of a story to run with the hysterical—and very useful to a select elite—claim that southern firms are too corrupt to do business with. It has helped to justify clientelistic programs of “assistance,” adverse credit policies, and legislation that meet the interests of a few to the disadvantage of the many (see n. 6). So, like in the past (Lo Cicero 2010; Pardo 1996, 2001), important contracts are often allocated to nonlocal firms based in the center-north; those firms then systematically proceed to subcontract the actual work to local firms. According to judicial inquiries (Ordinanza di Rinvio a Giudizio 26/3/2015), the recent gas network affair in the province of Naples gives a good example of how these firms bribe local rulers to get contracts; they may also deal with local organized crime (Pardo and Marotta 2017).

Long-term anthropological field research, particularly among less privileged Neapolitans, has both brought to light serious flaws in the stereotype of southerners and made a strong case for an alternative one (Pardo 1996, 2012a, 2017b). It has suggested that there is no plausible justification to casting the thousands of officially unemployed as an underclass who either starve or become employed by organized crime. It has also suggested that the relationships between the legal and the illegal are problematic and flexible, not ascribed and self-perpetuating. Many ordinary people perform work activities that are not explicitly legal without considering themselves “criminals,” and they subscribe to strong cultural motivations that leave morally and socially isolated those who engage in “crime” (see, e.g., Pardo 1996, chap. 2). This complexity has brought new light on citizens’ relations with their rulers, both present and past.

Emphasizing both the earlier point that inflating corruption is corrupting and the reflection that those with power can cross the line more easily with less risk (Smart 2018), over the past 20 to 30 years, there has been a huge growth in corrupt practices in politics and in domains as different as the health service, public administration, and public education. As elsewhere in Europe, relevant actors in these fields are contiguous. This problem extends far beyond strictly illegal dealings. Notoriously, in Italy, the public sector is used for political patronage—to recruit clients and govern support (Fukuyama 2015; Pardo 1996, chap. 6)—and, as I have mentioned earlier, the principle of a bureaucracy functioning in the collective interest, not through favoritism and corruption, is not fully established (Pardo 1996; Prato 2000). In past works, I have addressed a kind of corruption that is made to fall within the strictly defined boundaries of the law through what Smart (2018) calls gaming the system that betrays its spirit. Central in this bending of the rules are the two key tactics, those of sotto governo (literally, subgovernment) and clientelism. The expression sotto governo refers to backstage interpersonal bargaining among politicians and other notables whose allegiances usually lie with different parties. Prato (2000) has offered a detailed analysis of the complex dynamics that mark this negative form of integration in government, which Italian politicians have mastered to undermine competition. Today, new, sophisticated, and legal forms of this tactic based on direct and indirect exchanges put to shame the clientelism of the Christian Democrats who “ruled the roost” until the late 1980s.

In left-wing Naples and its region, like in right-wing Milan (Il Mattino 2017), well-connected businessmen and businesswomen enjoy privileged access to public contracts and jobs, and lucrative consultancies are given to “experts” who are linked to people who control large packets of votes and who are appointed to do highly paid jobs that, in some cases, are nonexistent (Demarco 2007:210) or, more often, pointless (Della Corte 2007:39–53, 143–147). I have discussed how local rulers have perfected a system privileging lobbies and interest groups through targeted policies and funding (Pardo 2012b, 2015). As local observers have convincingly shown, this well-oiled method is based on a combination of ideological stances and astute management of both the media and a tightly structured system of favors. Pragmatically, such governance has nurtured select clienteles at lower levels, too, as exemplified by the employment of an excessive number of workers in the local council—by the em-
the huge amounts of accumulated waste (Pardo 2011) but, by their own admission, have never worked much; they are paid US$1,300 per month (Della Corte 2007, chap. 4; Demarco 2007:194–197; Iovene and Lombardi 2008:164–172), while consultancies relating to waste cost almost US$10 million, and the rubbish problem continues (Ausiiello 2017). A further example mirrors locally a national problem that is currently the object of controversial proposed legislation on payment of due to companies that have executed work for public bodies. Local administrators have long postponed paying their creditors through a combination of strong-arm tactics, soothing language, red tape, bureaucratic buck passing, and legal wrangling that exemplifies the exaggerated significance of bureaucracy to politics in contemporary society. Meanwhile, they have pressured the legislative body into giving them standing ground through legislation that has made rulers not responsible for the debts contracted by their predecessors and has transferred a large part of legal responsibility from politicians to committees of nonelected officials. Generating judicial proceedings, important public assets have been sold, but the money has not been used to repay debt; as detailed by the Ministry for the Economy and Finance, to date, the local administration has not yet paid 45% of the money due for the work and services that it has contracted. Again, this is just within the law. For my informants from all walks of life, this is higher-level “exclusive” corruption—as opposed to low-level “diffused” corruption (Pardo 2004c:37–38). It is unquestionably despicable, and it is received as particularly abhorrent in sectors where the ordinary man and woman are at their most vulnerable, as in the cases of the Health Service (Pardo 2004c:39ff.) and public health (Pardo 2011).

It remains to be seen what impact the continuing judicial investigations will have on the belief that taking the initiative in offering money, services, or support to a bureaucrat, and especially to a politician or his friends, may be illegal—or “only” immoral—but it is also the most efficient way of pursuing goals, including goals to which one has a right. No one, here, is considered to be unworthy of involvement in corruption or excluded in principle from it. No positive ethical judgment is attached to this level of corruption; in a variety of cases, it is, instead, just seen as convenient; and, as elsewhere (Gupta 2012; Prato 2000, 2011; Sharma 2018; Smart 2018), my informants are acutely aware that turning rights into privileges is an injustice and a major distortion of the constituents of citizenship that engenders a large proportion of corruption in their country.

As the prescribed relations of reciprocal control between politicians and bureaucrats have lost their strength, highly varied modes of exchange have become the norm but, perhaps inevitably, continue to be addressed only in part by the law. Not only can payment be made in intangible, often untraceable ways; it can also be delayed in the context of generalized local, national, and international relations of exchange. The corruption of public bureaucrats often intervenes in the process, reducing risks for politicians through complex transactions that critically limit the efficacy of controls. In the more sophisticated cases, payment takes the form of an assurance that a new alliance has been forged, adding to the moral and practical ambiguity of the exchange and of the ensuing socioeconomic relations. Money is seldom taken by the political boss, because it is usually intermediaries who take care of this part of the deal. When faced with hard evidence, the boss claims to have been an unwitting instrument, which flies in the face of the empirical fact that these practices find support in a web of relationships based on shared interests and complicity that barely conceal what Nugent (2018) calls “coercive conditions.”

To recap, the continuing significance of the national phenomenon of corruption and dubious dealings in public office emphasizes the classic points that, in Italy as elsewhere, there is often a disconnection between legislation and its application (Miller 2000; Pardo 2004a); that when new legislation and policies are implemented, they often have effects unrelated to those intended; and that negotiations of legality happen across society.

Bread and Circuses (and Gallows): Misgovernance Persists in Naples

In a democracy, good government means unquestionably and above all that rulers take care of all citizens, not just of those in line with their approach (Pardo and Prato 2011). No anthropologist would disagree with Bocarejo’s point (2018) that corruption ought to be understood in light of ordinary people’s experience of the complexities of the tension between legality and illegality and of the everyday reality of governance.

Today’s Naples encapsulates the corrupting impact of governance that panders to interest groups at the expense of the rest of society (Pardo 2017b). The mayor used to be a controversial public prosecutor (Chiocci and Di Meo 2013). Anchored in a fringe radical ideology and rhetoric of “alternative” politics, he has styled himself as the leader of a colorfully termed but never implemented a plethora of questionable actions (Demarco 2016; Mazzarella 2016; Tuccillo 2014)—among them, an instrumental use of public resources for political gain (Pardo 2017b). As local economists document (Lo Cicero 2017), this is occurring in a financial context where the Naples administration is—again (Montefusco 1997)—perilously close to bankruptcy, which is, again, postponed through legalistic cunning (Grassi 2015; Roano 2017; Tuccillo 2014). In the eyes of many informants who refuse to suspend disbelief, the mayor embodies a déjà vu of a rather tragic vignette as he keeps pledging a renaissance of the city that never happens. Perhaps such a pledge finds justification in the belief that, if you say something often enough, people will believe that it is true, or perhaps in the hope that it might not sound stale to Neapolitans, because enough
time had passed since the mid-1990s, when an "ex-"-Communist mayor made a remarkably similar pledge (Pardo 2012b).

Since the 1990s, local rulers have practised versions of a “bread and circuses (and gallows)” approach, evoking memories of late Imperial Rome. In line with the clientelism that I have outlined in the previous section, “bread” is given to a chosen like-minded few in the form of funding, contracts for public works, consultancies, jobs, and so on, mostly in exchange for political support (Cuozzo 2017a; Tuccillo 2014). Meant to keep “the population” happy and unmindful of the administrative shortcomings and unfairness that exacerbate urban problems, the mostly public funded “circus” is free for “all.” Specifically, following in the steps of their Communist (Pardo 1996) and ex-Communist (Pardo 2012b: 67) predecessors, today’s rulers have capitalized on capturing key urban spots to stage political rallies, mass parties, sporting events, art shows, and street performances. They have used these events to promote their rhetoric about the “right things to do” and, as in the past, those who tow the line are lent moral weight in terms of civic consciousness; the unaligned many who resent the waste of money, the instrumentality, the shallowness, and the noise are marginalized. The “gallows” part is embodied by the dismal economic and environmental urban reality that residents experience in their daily lives. Let me explain.

It is not surprising that my informants of various social standing castiguate such an approach as morally and ethically corrupt. They broadly refer to the “bread and circus (and gallows)” metonymy when describing the superficial means of appeasement to which they are subjected while having to endure an urban infrastructure that keeps decaying and policies that have contributed to make most autochthonous people feel as if they are treated as second-class citizens (Pardo 2009, 2012a, 2017b). As a local shopkeeper put it, “we continue to live in run-down buildings and unkempt streets, have to endure more than our fair share of the difficulties that characterize urban life across the world and our health is persistently at risk.” While the general economic crisis has gradually translated into unemployment for many formally employed workers and into joblessness for many traditionally unemployed workers (ISTAT 2016; Pardo 2012a; SVIMEZ 2015:6–12), local rulers have practiced a combination of selective action and instrumentally targeted inaction, the effects of which have further penalized local economic activities. Interestingly, autochthonous licensed street traders and shopkeepers are fined for using more public space than is allowed by their permits, while hundreds of unlicensed immigrants freely peddle their wares, literally clogging pedestrian areas throughout the city (Pardo 2017b). In a separate essay (Pardo 2012a), I have addressed this problematic, looking at how this double-standards approach to autochthonous people and immigrants not only has harmed the complex and varied relations between immigrant and native entrepreneurs but has turned ordinary Neapolitans’ traditional tolerance of diversity into an uneasy kind of toleration that, in some cases, has turned into resentment of nonnative urban dwellers and violent action.25 The integration or failed integration of many immigrants, I have suggested (Pardo 2009), must be read in the context of the failed full integration of native Neapolitans. Keeping in mind that entrepreneurship is notoriously frustrated in southern Italy by overcomplicated regulation and by the difficulties caused by the stereotype of southerners, it seems particularly galling that mismanagement of the power to rule has raised conflict between citizens and noncitizens, including legal and illegal immigrants. So, as immigrant numbers, mostly illegal, keep growing out of any semblance of control, racists and xenophobes are gripped by an elated sense of entitlement to violence.

Unfortunately, there is more. In recent times, local authorities have turned a blind eye to radical groups’ illegal occupation of public space. In some cases, such occupation has been later legalized through ad hoc municipal decrees that emphasize the moral relativism of the law (Fuller 1964; Saltman 1985). The use that local authorities have made of publicly owned buildings of historical value, for which they are under investigation for abuse of office and financial damage caused to the public purse, is an example of a practice that has occurred throughout Italy. The Asilo Filangieri is one of several similar cases in Naples. This important historical building was restored at public expense to be used as a venue for international cultural events. It was illegally occupied by radical groups and has since visibly deteriorated. However, those illegal occupants have been turned into legal occupants through ad hoc municipal decrees (of May 25, 2012, December 29, 2015, and June 1, 2016). As amply reported in the media, these actions are the object of two separate but linked judicial investigations (Postiglione 2017).

Italians say, “il pesce puzza dalla testa” (fish stinks from the head). The Naples City Council is directly responsible for local transport, important parts of which are found wanting. European Union funds earmarked for work that contributes to the development of an “integrated urban transport system” have been used to establish cycling lanes throughout the city consisting in bicycle symbols painted on pedestrian areas, where the very few cyclists who use them now have precedence over pedestrians. The Naples public transport system is close to total collapse, and workers are losing their jobs (Cuozzo 2017b; Grassi 2015). The local leader of the center-left Democratic Party (PD) recently complained that “in 1997 there were 800 buses, now there are 300 and they are 17 years old” (Scarlata 2016), and the buses are often out of action.

Like their predecessors, who governed Naples for over 20 years (Pardo 2001, 2012b, 2015), the “orange revolutionaries,” too, won power by making grand promises. Their critics

25. The distinction between tolerance and toleration is analytically critical (Pardo 2009:122–124). Prato (2009) has developed a well-argued comparative discussion of the dynamics that make the former turn into the latter and of the attendant conceptual, social, and political implications and responsibilities.
note that their rule has been mired in administrative weakness, bureaucratic inefficiency, and exclusive pandering to their constituency (Chiocci and Di Meo 2013; Frascani 2017, chap. 1; Tuccillo 2014). Unable to reconcile their ideology of “right” and “wrong” with ordinary people’s values and lifestyles, they would appear to be losing credibility, and they have also repeatedly dallied in what many informants describe as expedient legalism. For example, I have been asked to note that, “while in office, the mayor received a 15-month suspended jail sentence for abuse of office and a hefty fine for libel. He was subsequently suspended from office by the judicial authorities. He appealed, and one month later managed to be reinstated on a technicality.” Similarly, the mayor’s deputy received a 1-year suspended jail sentence for having assaulted a policewoman. He, too, remains in office.

Even to a most forgiving eye, there is something rotten in Naples. While the municipality is in serious shamefully main parties of the center left and the center right continue to be future, Naples seems destined to get more of the same. As the that were won were squandered (Esposito 2015). And yet, as most European funding continues to be missed through inefficient or incompetence (Esposito 2015; Tuccillo 2014), as are opportunities for social and economic development, and funds that were won were squandered (Esposito 2015). And yet, as some local critics point out (Demarco 2016), in the foreseeable future, Naples seems destined to get more of the same. As the main parties of the center left and the center right continue to be shamefully—or shamelessly—incapable of offering (some say “instrumentally unwilling to offer”) credible alternatives, the mayor was recently reelected by 67% of the 35% of the Neapolitans who bothered to vote. His electoral campaign engendered a second golden age of post-fact politics—the time when an “embellishment” is regarded as so brilliant that it harks back to the great “embellishments” of the first golden age of his first electoral campaign and first term in office. From an ethnographically informed perspective, it seems both interesting that less than a fourth of the electorate should want him to stay and worrying that two-thirds should have given up hope of making a difference. My Neapolitan informants echo Sharma’s in India (2018) and Prato’s in Albania (2011) when they say that they are made to feel that they live in a crippled democracy where they have no control over governance—a problem that, as we shall see, extends to the rest of the country.

Corrupting the Democratic Contract Italian Style

It was once said that what happens in Italy often precedes similar processes elsewhere in Europe. This may or may not be true. Undeniably, however, Italy exemplifies a serious crisis in the Western version of democratic life. Understanding what is going on there may well have broader clarifying value.

Governance must be more than merely legal. It must enjoy the authority and trust across society that give it legitimacy. Persistent misgovernance, politicking, corruption, and abuse that do or do not break the law; ruling by double standards and by selective interests; and rulers’ arrogance in manipulating the law have engendered a hopelessness in the democratic process that has found expression in many Italians’ withdrawal from participation. The described events encapsulate key processes in Europe that are bringing to a head the true impact of the broken covenant between the ruled and their rulers. The ugly implications for the democratic system reach far beyond politics as they crosscut crucial domains of the state (Bobbio 1987; Pardo 1996; Prato 2000).

Critically, the Naples ethnography is mirrored across Italy, a Group of Seven country marred by the progressive corruption of the basic democratic principle of unequivocal separation between the powers of the state and by repeated breaches in the democratic contract, whereby unelected governments have been in power since 2011. Underpinned by an elitist and technocratic vision of politics, these events have engendered a marked erosion both of trust between citizenship and governance and of representative responsibility.

Bringing out what, until relatively recently, could have been described as a hidden aspect of corruption that does not break the law, in 2011 Mario Monti, a professor of economics, was made lifetime senator by the president of the republic a few days before being appointed prime minister. Article 92 of the Italian Constitution gives the president the authority to appoint the prime minister and approve the list of the members of the cabinet. Constitutionally, the president is free to select the prime minister from among the country’s outstanding political personalities. However, according to established practice, before designating the prime minister, the president calls official meetings to consult with former presidents of the republic, the presidents of the Chamber of Deputies and of the Senate, and the leaders of the main political parties. Then, the new government must obtain a vote of confidence from the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate (Art. 94). Since the foundation of the Italian Republic, prime ministers have been parliamentarians. Monti, who had not been elected to the Parliament, proceeded to preside over an equally unelected government—an arrangement that continues today.

So, dovetailing with the Latin saying quoted earlier, Italians have had to witness the progressive disfigurement of their democracy as they have been made to feel that they have no say in the matter of who rules them. Legal corruption in public life breaks trust. Persistent legal corruption in public life may do so irreparably. Many find it hard to shake off a below-stairs feeling of powerlessness, which may turn into angry disaffection, distrust, and withdrawal from civic engagement. To a cynical observer, this may seem fitting in a European Union context run mostly by unelected officials, to the increasingly obvious dissatisfaction of an increasingly large proportion of ordinary Europeans. Nonetheless, crucial issues arise regarding the nature and future of the democratic state (Pardo 1996, 2011; Ruggiero 1996).

In Italy, the tiny but powerful elite groups who appear to be allergic to the general, basic principles of the democratic contract clearly find this situation appealing; to everyone else, this situation is appalling. Let me be more specific. The appointment to office of unelected prime ministers and their
cronies by the president of the Republic is the object of debate in all walks of life across the country. From a strictly legalistic constitutional perspective, I stress, such an action is correct. From a grassroots political and moral perspective, it is highly questionable and lacks legitimacy. The chickens came home to roost on the occasion of the 2016 referendum for substantial constitutional changes. The then-unlected prime minister and his unelected government strongly sponsored the referendum. Again, this was formally correct. However, for many ordinary Italians, this action was problematic, because the prime minister and his government lacked democratic legitimacy, and because the referendum jeopardized constitutional integrity and key constitutional principles to meet the interests of select political lobbies. At the polls, the proposed changes were rejected by a large majority.

Conclusion
In closing, I point to the alluring but empty sound bite, “zero tolerance of corruption”—empty because, in light of the foregoing analysis, it has little practical value with respect to corruption that breaks the law and no value whatsoever with respect to legal corruption. We have seen that control over resources, spin, and rhetoric may well be instrumental to a certain kind of management of power. However, that power absolutely needs to be “legitimated” by observable results; it needs to be legitimated by good—responsible and authoritative—governance. Whatever efforts may be made to spin them into something else, facts are terribly stubborn, and sooner or later hype comes to be recognized for what it is. The Italian case strongly suggests that, as the experience of corruption, moral and criminal, inevitably conflates rational legal authority and impersonal rules with the realm of selective interests, that experience gains corrosive power in the relationship between citizenship and governance.

Corruption draws on an interaction between power (and its asymmetries) and its dishonest, self-serving, or incompetent exercise, whereby the misuse of power breeds corruption and feeds on it. The most obvious casualties, we have seen, are political responsibility, trust in governance and in the institutions of the state, and citizens’ rights. The less immediately obvious but alarming casualties are the democratic covenant and democracy itself.

Anthropologists have addressed the disjunction between belief in and empirical evidence of the pervasive nature of corruption, but they have also explored how people achieve their goals without resorting to corruption, and they have examined the role played by the belief, where it exists, that corruption is everywhere, cannot be completely eradicated, cannot be avoided or is not worth avoiding, and can be contained only with great difficulty (Gupta 1995; Parry 2000; Pardo 2004a). Anthropologists have shed light on the reproductive force of corruption and abuses of power and have shown that their reality and the recognition of their negative implications are not always matched by appropriate state intervention in the form of legislation, prevention, and punishment. We have seen that official attitudes often verge on a more or less explicit expedient appeasement or overtly obey powerfully networked interests. We have also seen that, equally often, legal measures fail to address the complex nature, causes, and dynamics of corruption and abuses of power.

We need to ask what can be done to keep under control and possibly prevent corruption that does not break the law. Addressing an excellent point made by Prato (2000) and Smart (2018), I have found that new legislation may well create new potential for legal but illegitimate behavior. It may well be true that corruption—including legal corruption—is not unavoidable or unassailable. Unhelpful relativism firmly aside, it remains to be seen, case by case, whether a lasting solution is at all possible.

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26. Through participant observation, interviews, and case-studies in Tuscany, Latium, and Sicily, as well as in Campania, I have recorded deep resentment of this kind of action by those in power. I address this issue at length in an essay that is now in preparation for publication.
Pardo Legal Corruption in Italy


London: Routledge.


New Brooms and Old
Sweeping Up Corruption in India, One Law at a Time

by Aradhana Sharma

Arvind Kejriwal is an anti-corruption crusader in India whose technomoral mission is to transform governance through the law, rendering it transparent, noncorrupt, and participatory. He was actively involved in the fight for the Right to Information Act, which became law in 2005. Dissatisfied with the workings of this law, however, Kejriwal organized the India Against Corruption movement to demand a new anti-corruption bill, which failed to pass. This essay focuses on the public discourse on corruption in the wake of the Right to Information Act and the India Against Corruption movement, and it puts law-focused anti-corruption strategies under critical scrutiny. I reveal the difficulty in delimiting corruption as well as the limits of the law in tackling it. A lack of consensus over what counts as real corruption and where its source lies complicates legal remedies. Indeed, as I argue, the law and corruption are inverted mirrors of each other. Where one is a symbol of rationalized modernity, the other reflects its dangerous underside; where one extends a formal economy of rules, the other refers to unruly practices of rule bending. Corruption transgresses and questions the very dualisms—public and private, state and society—that liberal law embodies. If the law produces corruption as a constitutive outside of the modern order, then using laws to dismantle corruption becomes a paradoxical undertaking that is bound to fail at its limits.

Cleaning the Filth
Corruption is a messy social practice, full of gray areas, which makes it difficult to study and to root out through the use of laws alone. While many in India (and elsewhere) accept corruption as a truism, they do not agree on its spatial borders, its “systemic” nature, or its beginning and end. Where some see it as a state disease that seeps into society, others view it as a wider cultural malaise that gets reflected in state institutions. Defining what counts as real corruption and who its true perpetrators and victims are is tricky (de Sardan 1999). Exceptions abound. Formally legal acts may be disparaged as immoral and antisocial, and illegal ones may well be seen as necessary and socially tolerable (Gupta 2012; Scott 1969). And then there are those who argue that corruption is not the real problem; that political, economic, and social inequality lie at the root of it; and that inequality is what should be tackled, not corruption per se.

The lack of consensus about what corruption is, what it does, and the kind of threat that it poses to society complicates any easy legal resolution. And yet, that is precisely how some Indian activists, led by Arvind Kejriwal, have approached the issue. When I first met Kejriwal and his associates in 2008, they were ardent advocates of India’s Right to Information Act (RTI), which attempts to make governance transparent and noncorrupt. But 3 years later, they shifted tactics. Arguing that the RTI alone could not end corruption and that India needed a tougher law, they launched one of the largest social movements in recent Indian history in 2011—the India Against Corruption (IAC) campaign—to fight for a new anti-corruption law.

To undo the limits of one law—the RTI, which came into force in 2005—with a more perfect law—the Jan Lokpal, or People’s Ombuds bill—to end state graft sounds awkwardly circular. But it captures well Kejriwal’s political strategy, which positions the law as the best means to engender systemic transformation. It also invites some questions, which I take up in this essay to critically examine the judicialized anti-corruption activism of which Kejriwal is a key example. First, if corruption is a systemic breakdown, then which system needs amending—the state, society, culture, or something else? Second, how is corruption defined and who is to blame for it? And finally, what are the constraints of uprooting corruption through the law?

The law and corruption, as situated social fields, are inverted mirrors of each other, deeply intertwined and co-constitutive: the one is a symbol of rationalized liberal modernity and the other a symbol of its dangerous, unwieldy underside. The law embodies and protects the public-private binary and the related state-society, formal-informal distinctions that constitute modern liberal state power; it also produces corruption as a criminal contamination of these sacrosanct divides. As trans-
gressive in-betweeness, corruption reveals the lived misce-
genation of categories that ought to be separate but are not so in practice (Gupta 2012). It threatens to expose how the state functions not as an ideal public democratic realm but as a privatized public propped up by a stupefying maze of rules and procedures that must be bent in order to make the system work, as Shiv Visvanathan (2008) has argued. Corruption scrambles the rationalized onstage face of modern state practices by revealing their messy backstage, and laws become the preferred mechanism to contain this danger.2

But ending corruption through the law is deeply paradoxical, as I elaborate in this essay. If the law needs and produces corruption in the wake of the RTI and the IAC campaign. I draw upon interviews, observations, and media commentaries that took place between 2008 and 2014 in Delhi, juxtaposing ethnographic vignettes that offer different takes on corruption: where it exists, who is to blame, and how to tackle it.4 Indeed, I suggest that such juxtaposition offers a powerful methodology for studying contentious social issues, like corruption, which defy consensus. It allows me to tease out the messy indeterminacy that colors the public discourse about corruption and the limitation, even impossibility, of cleansing the system with the law (see Pardo 2018 and Smart 2018). My analysis, in reflecting the matter at hand, does not seek neatness or closure, as the spirit of the law would dictate. Moreover, like other authors in this volume of Current Anthropology, I am interested in approaching corruption in its everydayness and productivity while keeping in view the structural inequalities that produce such acts and are often propped up by laws.

Although my focus in this essay is contemporary India, corruption is neither a “new” problem nor a solely Indian one.6 Global development institutions, like the World Bank, define it as a menace to “good governance” and rank countries on the basis of an apparently standardized metric of venality. That postcolonial and postsocialist countries rank lower on these indexes is unsurprising given that they are also considered imperfectly modern when measured by Western benchmarks that pass as “universals” (Chakrabarty 2000; Merry 2011; Tidey 2018). Social movements fighting locally to end corruption cannot avoid articulating with the globally dominant language of “good governance” purveyed by powerful international institutions (Abrahamsen 2000). The story I tell here, then, is at once specific to India and translocal. It is also a gendered one. The actors in the vignettes I narrate below are mostly men who seem to offer neutral analyses: since everyone is affected by corruption, there is apparently no need to discuss who encounters it, how, or why. Corruption is a masculinist discourse not only because privileged voices define the terms on which the “problem” is debated but also because of the troubled nature of the public-private boundary that overdetermines the issue; this binary, which also lies at the heart of liberal law, has been profoundly consequential for gendered lives (Brown 1995; MacKinnon 1989; Menon 2004; Sunder Rajan 2003). Discussions about corrup-

1. Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992) and Sudipta Kaviraj (1997) discuss the problematic nature of the conceptual distinction between public and private spaces in colonial India, which the state tried to police and manage through policies, laws, and rules.
2. Lars Buur (2001), discussing the workings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, reveals the bureaucratising work that goes into maintaining the apparent separation of the onstage and backstage, the visible and invisible, and the public and private.
3. The social actors in my ethnography also insisted upon the black-and-white logic of the law. Even when they disagreed on the interpretations and usages of specific laws, they agreed about its underlying “spirit” and force as a precise system that is meant to classify right and wrong in a dualistic manner. In this essay, I follow my informants’ lead in my use of “the law” in terms of its binary logic.
4. My research project began in 2008 as an examination of the social life of the RTI in poor and middle-class neighborhoods in Delhi. But as the main group of activists I was following altered their political focus, organization, and strategy—from a pro-transparency NGO to an anti-corruption social movement to a political party—my ethnographic ground also shifted. I followed this core group until 2014, after they had transformed from activists to elected officials in Delhi.
5. In the case of India, Nicholas Dirks (2006) argues that state corruption—“scandal”—was essential to colonial rule. Low-paid functionaries routinely indulged in private commerce and extractive financial deals to supplement their salaries and to ascend to positions of power. Top officials were also deeply implicated in corruption, as the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings revealed.
6. India currently shares the 76th position with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Zambia, and others on Transparency International’s index (http://www.transparency.org/cpi2015#results-table; accessed January 7, 2017).
tion and legal reforms, thus, cannot be extricated from the patriarchal logic of liberal state power.

Since public debates about corruption in the context of the RTI and the IAC campaign lie at the heart of my ethnography, and because Arvind Kejriwal is associated with both, I begin by contextualizing his political trajectory. I then juxtapose different perspectives on corruption, highlighting the disagreements over its source and over the kinds of acts that count as truly venal. These contentions lead me to ruminate on the limits of the law in ending corruption.

A Morphing Politics

A bureaucrat-turned-activist-turned-politician, Kejriwal is a man with a technomoral mission (Bornstein and Sharma 2016): for him, eradicating corruption and sweeping governance clean is a moral imperative best achieved through technocratic, legal remedies. He offers a model of the sort of judicialized anti-corruption politics that I put under critical scrutiny in this essay: it is one that expresses an enduring faith in the law as mechanism for rationalizing governance.7

When I first met him in 2008, Arvind, as everyone addressed Kejriwal then, was a transparency advocate running Parivartan, a nongovernmental organization (NGO)–like body that promoted public awareness and use of the RTI. The product of a protracted 15-year grassroots struggle, the RTI promised to reverse the opacity and unaccountability that had defined governance since colonial times. By unlocking public access to the archive of state records, this law sought to promote clean, noncorrupt, and good governance. But barely 3 years after its passage, Arvind, who had helped draft the RTI, seemed disenchanted with its functioning.

“The RTI law does not seem to be working,” he told me one October afternoon in 2008, as we sat in Indian Coffee House, popularly known as an activist “adda,” or den. “We have a great RTI Act, but officials are not giving information. They are not scared of the RTI act.” I nodded, having observed how state representatives subverted transparency (Sharma 2013). Officials rejected RTI petitions and appeals on spurious grounds. They delayed responses or sent responses that were essentially illegible, written as they were in coded “bureaucratese” that is hard for anyone but experts to comprehend. They were also altering documentary practices so as to render transparency meaningless: instead of recording departmental deliberations about projects in writing and initialing their opinions, as they are supposed to do, some officials were writing opinions on removable sticky notes or discussing projects over the telephone to preserve their anonymity.8 By thus manipulating the contents of files, these officials were thwarting the transparency law: no written record meant no information and no person to hold accountable for bad decisions and corrupt acts. At the same time, however, the RTI was quite effective in helping the poor get subsidized food, schooling, and other entitlements that they had been unable to access earlier because of misinformation and “leakages.” Many RTI NGOs, including Arvind’s Parivartan, were facilitating just these sorts of successes. So why did he seem disheartened with the RTI? Arvind broke my reverie, as if on cue:

“RTI is a behतareen [excellent] tool. It is necessary but not sufficient for changing the system. Even if RTI works, it is just one small part. . . . If money has been siphoned off or there is corruption, [RTI] exposes all that. What do I do with that information? You make a complaint to the vigilance agencies, to the Central Bureau of Investigation, to the police, to the chief minister, to the president, to the prime minister. No action is taken. . . . RTI just gives information. That’s all. That is not a guarantee that the system will work better. So that brings us to the larger issues of what ails governance. What comes out is that the ordinary citizen, in his [sic] day-to-day functioning, has no control over governance. And this is not democracy. It is a sham. [For] real change . . . you need better understanding of our system, and you need a different campaign altogether.”

The desire for a “different campaign” led Kejriwal to organize the IAC movement in 2011, which took a technomoral approach to expunging the “biggest evil” facing India through a new anti-corruption law: the Jan Lokpal bill sought to establish a powerful suprastate agency to punish graft, purify governance, and thus save the nation. After organizing protests and public discussions and negotiating over a draft law with the ruling Congress Party–led government for over a year, the IAC disbanded in August 2012 because the government refused to approve the campaign’s proposed anti-corruption law. Kejriwal chose to enter the electoral fray. In November 2012, he founded the Aam Aadmi (Common Man) Party (AAP), calling it a “political revolution” (News X 2012) that would “change

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7. Comaroff and Comaroff note the “judicialization of politics” (2006: 26) across postcolonial and postsocialist worlds because of neoliberal reforms that promote rule by law and liberal democracy. For how this is unfolding in India, see Randeria and Grunder (2009) and Bornstein and Sharma (2016).

8. Parivartan was not registered as an NGO but was perceived as one by the media and public.

9. The campaign for information freedom was led by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (Worker Peasant Power Collective), a grassroots group in Rajasthan.

10. This was the controversy over “file notings.” Put in place by the British, file notings document the work flow within a government department on its various projects, recording the opinions of various functionaries, deliberations, and final decisions. The bureaucratic establishment argued that, since notings record “internal” state decision-making, they should not be made public. Activists countered that state transparency and accountability would be meaningless without these records—the public would not know who to hold responsible for bad decisions. In the end, officials were forced to share file notings but found ways to subvert this requirement (see Sharma 2013).

the current corrupt and self-serving system of politics forever.” Represented by the symbol of the broom, the AAP contested and won Delhi state elections twice. It debuted as part of a coalition government in December 2013, but its reign was short-lived: the AAP resigned after 49 days because it failed to pass its signature anti-graft bill. Its second victory came in February 2015, when the party won 67 out of 70 seats. Kejriwal, now reinstalled as the chief minister of the state, led the Delhi legislature to pass a new anti-corruption bill in late 2015. The central government’s Home Ministry, however, has yet to approve this bill.13

Taking It from the Top: Fix Governance!

Corruption is a crime of calculation, not passion. . . . Combating corruption, therefore, begins with designing better systems. (Klitgaard 1998:4)

“There are two forms of corruption, mutual and extortionist” Kejriwal told me one morning, in his usual rapid-fire, no-nonsense style. It was July 2009, and we sat in his office, trying to have a conversation amid all sorts of interruptions. “Mutual is when the giver and receiver are both happy and no one says anything. [It is] generally related to corporations vying for government contracts. Extortionist is when people have to pay bribes to get legitimate work done.” Kejriwal saw the latter—retail corruption—as more rampant than the “big ticket” type, and also dangerous. “Almost every single individual in this country is turning corrupt. The entire psyche of the nation is turning corrupt,” he claimed. What accounted for people turning versus being corrupt? “The system is corrupt, not people. Nobody is born corrupt. They are made corrupt.” And what was this system? Neither family nor society nor education, but administrative and elected state structures. In a published interview, Kejriwal stated:

Till now, in this country, we have not paid any attention to governance systems. . . . There are very small departments in the government with less than . . . 200 people. And even some of them are corrupt. You have the Delhi Metro which has more than 7,000 people, but it is performing very well. Why? It is not that E. Sreedharan [Managing Director] sits on each and every person’s head; it is because he has developed the right kind of systems. . . . [M]any of [the] officers in Delhi Metro come on deputation from the railways. When they come to Delhi Metro, they behave properly. I think we need to talk of the right kind of systems, and it is precisely these systems that we are attempting to put in place through the Jan Lokpal bill. . . . [I]t is the system that will govern the character and the performance of the people. (Bhatt 2011) Kejriwal often used the metro as a model of an exceptional bureaucracy—well-organized and efficiently run. E. Sreedharan had designed a good metro system, which automatically produced disciplined, responsible subjects (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996; Foucault 1991) and deterred corruption. Systems were good or bad, not people; people, it seemed, simply acted out internalized systems, or “habitus” in a Bourdieuan sense (1998). Hence the solution to corruption had to be a technomoral one: implementing a rationalized institutional system across state bureaucracies that induced ethical behavior.

My friend Jaydeep, a senior civil servant, disagreed with Kejriwal and the IAC’s framing of corruption as a disease primarily afflicting the state. People who supply milk diluted with water and autorickshaw drivers who charge more than the metered fare, he claimed, were all corrupt. And these were some of the very aam aadmis, or ordinary people, that IAC claimed to speak for. So why single out government institutions as corrupt?

I posed this question to Kamal, a twentysomething migrant from Bihar who had quit his job to join the IAC movement in 2012: why should anti-corruption efforts aimed at vyavastha parivartan, or systemic change, focus solely on the state? “Because everyone knows that all netas [political leaders] are thieves and the main orders come from above,” he responded plainly. Kamal recalled the billions lost in the 2G, Commonwealth Games, and mining scams, in which state and corporate actors were implicated. “Our system is rotten. There is too much corruption.” But what about commonplace bribing? I pushed: “We all do it, no?” He nodded. “It is partly our own fault. When someone asks for a bribe, we give it. Arvind told us that we should ‘introspect’ about that.” I cut in: “Okay. But how would you respond to people who allege that the milk sellers and autorickshaw drivers who scam the public are corrupt?” Now Shalini, another IAC participant who was listening to my conversation with Kamal, chimed in. “If you ask the milk seller why he mixes water with milk, he will tell you, ‘Inflation has increased so much; what am I to do?’ Autorickshaw drivers face the same problem. It is the government, after all, that passes the budget.” In Shalini’s perspective, liberalization-oriented state policies compelled ordinary people to cheat in order to survive. These people were victims of a system over which they had no control, and their transgressions were therefore forgivable. Kamal agreed with Shalini: “Oopar se hi main hai [The main corruption is at the top]. It forms a chain, from the top to the bottom,” he said, making a gesture with his hands to indicate a downward flow. “That is why corruption is increasing down here [in society].” He called politicians, located at the head of the chain, “a breed unto themselves . . . [with] no fear of repercussions”; a strong anti-corruption law was meant to cultivate just such a fear. “But these politicians have emerged from society, haven’t they, like you and me?” I probed further. “Bilkul [absolutely],” answered Kamal. “However, Arvind says that the ‘chair’ [kursi] is so powerful that it corrupts anyone who sits in it.” Even students active in radical politics during the 1970s turned corrupt when they entered government agencies.


13. The AAP has accused the Narendra Modi-led central government of subverting and disabling the governance of Delhi (Ashraf 2016).
and occupied seats of power, Kamal reminded me, “We need an efficient system, which has controls, checks, and balances; then people will change automatically.”

The IAC members used words like “top,” the “chair,” and the “system” to discursively construct the state as the fountainhead of venality, whose vertical authoritative ness (Ferguson and Gupta 2002) was compromised by immorality. Skilled and honest men who understood the system had to stop the venom at the top through legal measures. This was the technomoral “good governance” project of the IAC and later AAP.

By defining corruption in a state-centric manner, Kejriwal and his associates were able to turn an apparently undifferentiated “India” against corruption: an outraged nation opposed to a venal state. In addition to undertaking the technical task of drafting a new anti-corruption law, movement leaders also used a variety of moral tactics. They deployed religious symbols depicting the nation—“Mother India”—as a Hindu goddess whose sanctity had to be protected from degeneracy. They borrowed liberally from the Gandhian repertoire, undertaking hunger strikes and calling their mobilization a sathyagraha or swaraj—a truth-based struggle for self-rule (Sharma 2014). They helped shape a cross-class “intimate public” (Bercant 2008) around the shared experience of corruption that rendered everyone equally ordinary as victims of corruption.

One person’s story of suffering at the hands of an unethical state system was every person’s story: “any man [became] everyman in [this] ritual of politics” (Visvanathan 2011). The victimized everyman was exhorted to join the virtuous battle led by Gandhian experts to root out the rot in government and save India. This battle, moreover, was presented as nonideological. As Kejriwal openly declared, “We are not wedded to any ideology. We are basically aam aadmis. We have problems. . . . We just want solutions to our problems” (Kejriwal 2013). If the daily problems of the public could not be reduced to ideology, neither could their solutions. Governance reform was a technical task impelled by moral righteousness and not an issue of right versus left politics.14 Period.

Although the ruling government did not pass the IAC’s Jan Lokpal bill, it agreed with the basic idea that ending corruption required a top-down legal approach. Manmohan Singh, then prime minister of India, proposed amending the existing Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988, as an alternative, which the IAC had declared too weak. The law, asserted Singh, required a top-down legal approach. Manmohan Singh, then prime minister of India, proposed amending the existing Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988, as an alternative, which the IAC had declared too weak. The law, asserted Singh, required a top-down legal approach. Manmohan Singh, then prime minister of India, proposed amending the existing Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988, as an alternative, which the IAC had declared too weak. The law, asserted Singh, required a top-down legal approach.

A ration shop owner who can afford to buy a ration card or his driving license [or] a corporation who gets seven paise [commission] on his kerosene . . . can’t run his shop [and] is forced into taking things, which are technologically not his entitlement because you create [such] systems. 15

bribes should be decriminalized, whereas accepting them should remain illegal (Basu 2011).

14. This resonates with Chantal Mouffe’s (2005) argument that politics today unfolds around moral struggles between right and wrong rather than ideological contests between left and right parties and groups.


16. Kaushik Basu, a former chief economic advisor, argued that giving bribes should be decriminalized, whereas accepting them should remain illegal (Basu 2011).
There are a whole lot of people who . . . are giving bribes for their entitlements [because] they . . . don’t have real options.”

As I watched this debate on television, I recalled meeting a ration shop owner at the Delhi Consumer Court in 2009 against whom Kejriwal had filed a lawsuit for defrauding customers by not opening the store regularly and cheating on the quantity and quality of food rations. This man was one among several defendants, but he believed that, unlike the others, he was not dishonest. Pointing to the fact that only one customer had lodged a complaint against him, he asserted that the case against him was not justified. “I am not corrupt! One should consider the qualities of a human being before taking legal action against them. I have to marry off three daughters!” he said, wringing his hands in desperation. “It is very difficult to manage with low commission rates.” This ration shop owner saw himself as a morally upstanding person who was an unfortunate victim of a system that left him no choice but to cheat (and “mildly,” at that) in order to survive and fulfill his social obligations.

What counts as corruption, then, eludes clarity—exceptions abound.17 Bribe givers are not considered immoral to the extent that they have to pay money to access their rights and entitlements. And cheats, like the bridge engineer and ration shop owners, are seen as honest casualties of an unruly system, cogs in an “evil”-generating, dysfunctional wheel.18 Daily survival in this chaotic, encumbered system of governance by milk sellers or autorickshaw drivers or ration shopkeepers becomes a narrative of helplessness and oppression rather than “play”—a creative bending, even rescripting, of indecipherable bureaucratic rules (Visvanathan 2008).

In the abovementioned NDTV program, Pratap Bhanu Mehta concurred with the sentiment that most people “are victims in the sense that, over the years, the Indian state has created such a labyrinthine structure that it has become very difficult at the individual level for people to be honest all the time.” But anchor Barkha Dutt was more skeptical: “This society that all of us are a part of, they [sic] are not victims necessarily.” She described how people routinely evade taxes and conduct real estate deals in black money, and she connected rampant corruption with the public’s “chalta hai [anything goes] attitude.”

I now turn to the view that corruption is a cultural malaise.

Cultural Pathology or a Tragedy of Our Mentality

*[people washed, changed, slept and even urinated and defecated out in the open. . . . To this Indian "chaos" was opposed the immaculate "order" of the European quarters. (Chakrabarty 1992:541)*

Responding critically to the IAC campaign, Anuj Chopra (2011) called corruption in India “a deeply engrained cultural neurosis that exists on every level of society,” which needed a better cure than the simplistic belief that “ferreting out crooked politicians alone will bring about a cataclysmic change.” Rather than focus on state corruption, Chopra shone light on “private corruption”—people selling their votes in exchange for cash and other handouts or paying bribes for low-paying government jobs because of the potential for extra income. The “tacit approval of private corruption,” wrote Chopra (2011), “is common across India’s social classes. . . . The Lokpal bill, if it works, might take down a few corrupt politicians. But the battle to slay corruption begins at home.”

The idea that corruption is a cultural epidemic, propagated in the private recesses of society, is reminiscent of the “culture of poverty” thesis, which blames the poor for reproducing their poverty and deficient values from one generation to the next, rather than seriously engaging political and economic histories and structures.19 Chopra similarly claimed that, far from being innocent casualties of corruption, Indians were active participants in perpetuating this filth. The masses and the classes all needed a thorough washing.

Chopra’s lament about corruption as cultural dirt can be read as a “modernist complaint” (Chakrabarty 1992:542), a ruining of India’s incomplete, “not-quite” quality of modernity. It brings to mind colonial governmentality: public hygiene projects, for example, which aimed to change dirty cultural habits and to create clean and governable colonial subjects and spaces.20 It also conjures developmentalism, which reads India’s deep-rooted culture of corruption as backwardness and as a symbol of polluted, even rogue, modernity. But rather than advocate for top-down statist policies or laws to rationalize society and cultivate modern values and civic citizenship, Chopra advocated for moral uplift through private civil-society programs. He highlighted iapidadabribe.com, an initiative that asks bribe givers to confess their transgressions to an online public. In the act of truth telling—how much they paid and to whom—they exonerate themselves, raise awareness, and help others, who can potentially avoid making the same mistake.

I met someone else who offered a similar “culturalist” perspective on corruption and raised doubts about the effectiveness of the law in curbing it. Ramesh Singh, a mid-level government official, was the designated public information officer (PIO) for his department in 2009, responsible for answering all information requests filed under the RTI.21 We had spoken

17. This has also been noted by de Sardan 1999.
18. Although the ration sellers that I spoke to saw themselves as nonagentive, blameless cogs in an unjust bureaucratic machine, I invoke “evil” here in the sense used by Hannah Arendt in her discussion of Adolf Eichmann’s trial (Arendt 1963): banal but conscious and not innocent.
19. This phrase was coined by Oscar Lewis (1969) and became an important mantra guiding anti-poverty programs, including in the United States.
21. Information commissioners have the power to penalize any PIO 250 rupees (roughly US$4) per day up to a maximum of 25,000 rupees for wrongfully withholding or destroying information or giving incomplete or incorrect information.
over the telephone, and he agreed to talk to me after making sure that I was not from the media (his boss had prohibited him from speaking to the media). I foolishly decided to drive to the interview. Frustrated by Delhi’s notorious traffic and distracted by Singh’s text message telling me that I was late, I missed the final turn that would have brought me to my destination. I pulled over, dreading the long loop I would be forced to take as a result of my mistake. When an onlooker suggested that I could reverse into the street leading to Singh’s office, I complied willingly, going the wrong way on a one-way street for about 25 feet. The onlooker even guided me, ensuring that my illegal maneuver would go smoothly.

Now 15 minutes late, I was shown to a room where two men sat. The man on the telephone waved me to a sofa, while the other barely glanced up from his desk. This government office was as banal as any other I had seen. Fluorescent lighting. Steel cabinets. Dull furniture. Impersonal, askew paraphernalia on white walls, including a dry erase board with alphanumeric codes that made no sense to me. And stacks of files. The only thing personal in that room was a picture of Sai Baba, an Indian holy man. But before I could consider which of the two officials in the room was a devotee, the man on the telephone hung up. “Ramesh Singh,” he said, walking over to where I sat. Aware of my interest in the RTI, he launched right into a monologue about transparency, corruption, laws, and the system:

“The intention of the RTI act is very good: transparency, accountability, and decreasing corruption. It has increased the role of the public in the form of participation. But, in order to participate properly in a democracy—make the right electoral choices, understand policies, judge if elected representatives are doing the right thing—a citizen needs to be educated [and] informed. The general public is unaware and therefore unempowered. Ninety-five percent usage of the RTI law is wrong. It is self-interested. Blackmailers misuse it.

He talked to me about reporters who ask PIOs for records and then threaten to expose governmental wrongdoing unless they are paid off and about people with “vested interests” who make PIOs party to cases that they file in court using information they get from RTI petitions. People have an axe to grind with each other, and the “PIOs are the ones who get caught in the middle,” Singh lamented. “Another big problem is that RTI petitions are not clear. There is confusion over whether applicants are asking questions or asking for information.” “Umm, what is the difference between the two?” I queried. “Take mailee [dirty] Yamuna,” piped in Singh. “Let’s say someone asks how much pollution has been created in the Yamuna river: how much acid, alkali, garbage, and sewage. That is a vague and huge question! You see, PIOs are not supposed to generate information, but only share existing information. Public awareness is a major obstacle. But government officials are also afraid of getting sued if awareness increases. People in the US,” said Singh, eyeing me pointedly, “regularly sue the government over public works and damages.” “So are state officials against the RTI law? Or do they support it?” I asked. Singh smiled wryly. “What sort of support can you expect from a person who feels bound [bandha hua] and obligated to reveal information. Something that was his privilege is no longer his. He feels attacked. When someone files an RTI application, [this officer] reacts: ‘Who does he think he is [iski aukat kya hai]! How dare he question me!’ Only a ‘reasonable’ officer will be supportive of the law—that is just 2% of all officials. Others are not taking it in the right spirit. They are forced to give information now. They don’t want to do it from their heart [dil se].”

Singh, however, was willing to cut these reluctant officers some slack, musing that perhaps they were not at fault, that the blame ought to be placed elsewhere. “You see, every system has positive and negative aspects, and these things affect the people who are part of the system. I will tell you about a Japanese man who came to work with us for a year. He was trained to be a ‘model citizen,’ who did not dirty his surroundings. He even flicked ash in his cigarette case!” My eyes widened and he nodded, expecting exactly that reaction. “But after one year of living in Delhi, he had no compunction about urinating in public!” Singh laughed loudly and went on to speak about people who do not spit in their own homes but have no problem with spitting in public places. “Log gandi cheez mein gand dalte hain.” Dirt begets dirt; a dirty environment invites filthy behavior. “Our system is like that,” he concluded.

Which dirty system was Singh referencing, I wondered. Was he echoing the part-critical, part-celebratory local discourse that India is corrupt but that is just the way things are, the “anything goes” attitude that Barkha Dutt had pointed to on NDTV? Or was it something else? Singh interrupted my rumination by declaring, “There is a general disrespect for laws here.” I squirmed, recalling my “minor” traffic violation that morning. “Even the Supreme Court’s directions are not obeyed.” Converting cabs and autorickshaws to natural gas or getting people to abide by the seat belt law presented challenges, he reminded me, and the transparency law was no different. “People know about their rights but hardly anyone knows about duties listed in article 51(A) of the constitution. That,” he paused for effect, “is the tragedy of our mentality. We need public awareness and education. Government awareness is also needed. But see, politics is a reflection of society. Society changes and so does politics.”

There was some convergence between Singh’s ideas and the IAC’s perspective that “the system” shapes individual behavior. But the system that needed changing, for Singh, was not the state so much as society. In his understanding, society cradled the state, blurring easy above-below, inside-outside, clean-dirty distinctions, especially where morality was concerned. The values nurtured in society were mirrored in the state: disrespect for public spaces and the law and a lack of civic sense, for instance. Corruption as a social problem could not be resolved by passing laws or targeting the state alone. The
need of the hour was to change the hearts and minds of the public and officialdom. And cultivating civic values and citizenship—like the Japanese—required a moral education in duties and obligations as social facts rather than abstract legal ones.

As Singh pointed out, technocratic legal appeals would not go very far in a context where people commonly subverted laws.

Breaking the Faith

I finally introduce Sumit, who took Singh’s skepticism of the law’s capability to correct governance away from culturalist arguments and toward a structural critique. For Sumit, state transparency and corruption, to the extent that they were issues at all, spoke to deeper hierarchies and oppression. “No law is going to change structural inequality,” he stated plainly, as if it were a truth as tangible as the feel of our skins. He offered a nuanced take on judicialized activism, emphasizing powerfully what I call the liberal limit of the law—its inability to deliver radical transformation of the kind Kejriwal had promised.

I encountered Sumit by chance at the cafeteria at the Alliance Française in Delhi, where the journalist I was supposed to interview brought him along. He sat at our table, slurping on a bowl of steaming Maggie noodles, listening to our conversation about NGOs and law-based activism, and piping in from time to time. His sporadic commentary was delivered with a deadpan obviousness that I had come to expect from activists involved in peoples’ movements and radical politics. I was intrigued. Sumit and I met a few days later at my request at a venue he chose: a roadside dhaba, or food stall, near the Delhi University campus. He placed his “usual” chai order with the dhaba-wallah—he was a regular—while I specified, “no sugar, please.” We sat under a Gulmohar tree, on fire with its springtime red blossoms. I took out my recorder, Sumit lit his first cigarette, and we began discussing transparency, corruption, and the upswing in judicialized politics.

His main issue with law-based projects of change was that they lacked a critique of the state. Such projects conveyed the belief that all that was needed was “a knowledgeable person, who knew everything about procedures and laws, [and whom] no one would be able to fool. That means that there is nothing wrong with [the state]. If you have a good person, he [sic] will make everything right.” Kejriwal certainly appeared as such a messianic figure to me.

Judicialized politics also enthroned the law as the main site and force of transformation. Although Sumit did not trivialize activists’ growing reliance on the law, he refused to see it as a magic bullet.

Pro-people and left forces should use the law as a space, but one should not be under the illusion that this is going to make a radical change in society. How are all these laws going to affect the feudal mind-set, or the patriarchal mind-set, or Brahminical ideology? I think those are the basic problems of Indian society—feudalism, patriarchy, capitalism. See, one has to understand what the system is. The system has a kind of class and gender logic that cannot be cleaned up by laws.

You need total abolition of the caste system and patriarchy in society. You need a radical restructuring of property relations, in old-fashioned socialist terms.

Sumit offered a different understanding of “the system,” one that was limited neither to the state, writ large, nor culture with a capital C, even as he emphasized the limits of the law in changing this system. I pushed him on this point. Were those who believed in the grand promise of the RTI simply wrong? This law, after all, was supposed to bring about a sea change in governance—instilling transparency and accountability and ending corruption. Sumit chuckled.

It is not that easy that you get a law and you get access to everything. I don’t think transparency is a problem. Today’s modern state is very complex. We have an extremely centralized state with a very sophisticated intelligence apparatus—a state within the state. If the state becomes totally transparent, so what! The inherently exploitative apparatus will stay there as is. The police will still shoot you. But now they will say, ‘Okay, I am shooting you.’ To put it more bluntly, supposing capitalism becomes transparent. So what! A person will say, ‘Okay, I’m transparent and I am exploiting you legally.’ But does it answer the structural exploitation in society? Capitalism needs the state to enforce contracts and to maintain law and order and to repress any possible rebellion. Supposing that state becomes totally honest and efficient and transparent. People may get some administrative relief, and in a class society, that counts. Because the way our bureaucrats behave—it is a feudal country, a decadent corrupt society. So naturally it will make things slightly better for the people. But I don’t think the exploitive system is going to go away.

He paused and took a long drag.

Now, corruption. Corruption is not an issue. India is very famous for corruption. You know, ‘the Third World,’ Countries which don’t have legal corruption—the US, for example—have lobbying, etcetera, etcetera. Do you think those are the perfect nonexploitative societies? No! Take the NREGA [National Rural Employment Guarantee Act]. You get all the information through RTI that the NREGA is implemented 100% according to the spirit and letter of the law. So what! You fix a minimum wage of 100 rupees per day. A business executive gets 10,000 rupees per day. Does that mean it is an ideal system? Even if the government implements all its schemes in a transparent and noncorrupt way, are we going to have an egalitarian society only through schemes?

22. Passed in 2005, this “right to livelihood” law guarantees 100 days of paid wage labor per year to households whose adult members are willing to do unskilled work.
Sumit readily admitted that the RTI law was partially successful in providing people with access to information, which is not a mean achievement “in a society with widespread illiteracy and widespread disinformation [spread by] mass media.” But to think that “the law is a magic wand, which will cure all the diseases—therein lies the danger.” I agreed and asked if there was “an alternative to this law-focused politics.” “It is not either-or,” he answered, and then elaborated: Our system is very corrupt, very callous, so you need some kind of cleaning up mechanism. My problem is one should not create too many illusions about the system, so that all your activists are busy writing petitions. . . . I call it ‘extra-legalism.’ It is depoliticizing people. Like, I’ll tell you my experience. I was part of a radical group in Bihar. I saw that the Village Health center and the public distribution system were not working. So I started writing petitions. I put in at least half a quintal of petitions to make one Village Health center, one ration shop work. Nothing happened. The senior members [of my group] laughed at me: ‘You are so stupid. Politics is not petition writing!’ So we found other ways. If a health center was not functioning properly, we would block the Subdivisional officer’s office for 48 hours. He would come, get the doctor, and get the center opened. This was practical political training for me. But social movement people, morning to evening, write applications—to the executive engineer, to the block development officer. . . . This is the attitude! You put so much faith [in] writing applications [and] knowing everything about procedures and laws. Everyday India gets truckloads of applications. The prime minister’s office has around 25 officers just to reply to these applications! Petitioning should be part of the whole activist process, but not everything. Because ultimately you are strengthening the status quo [and] in the long-term it can be dangerous. Writing applications may help marginalized groups access government programs, but they will always remain marginalized.

I nodded. He took another long drag and blew out smoke, away from my face. “If applications could change a society, then why struggle? Let us give a memorandum to the prime minister for implementing socialism in this country!”

I burst out in raucous laughter. And Sumit joined in.

A Multiplying Maze

In this essay, I have used Arvind Kejriwal’s trajectory of law-focused technomoral politics and public discussions about corruption in the context of the RTI and the IAC movement in India to think about corruption as limit phenomenon and to consider the limits of the law in wiping it out. Corruption at once transgresses the idealized limit between the public and private realms that firmly undergirds liberal law and defies delimiting. There is avid disagreement in the Indian public sphere about which corrupt system to target, how to separate innocent victims from wrongdoers, and how to distinguish between “bona fide mistakes and colorable exercise of power,”23 as the former prime minister, Manmohan Singh, put it. The discourse on corruption teems with gray areas. Legal and social understandings of good and bad, legitimate and illegitimate, do not map neatly onto each other. Exceptions muddle the apparent “rule,” the truism, of corruption.

As a morphing spectrum of social practices, corruption is anything but universal or circumscribable. It confounds the clear boundaries, the “dos and don’ts,” that the modernist logic of the law demands. Mathematical equations, like “C = M + D − A [or] Corruption equals Monopoly plus Discretion minus Accountability” (Klitgaard 1998:4), and laws based on such precise definitions work well as aesthetic exercises in simplification, in imposing formulaic systematicity on what is “an inherently untidy experience” (Douglas 2002:5). But they ultimately fail to contain the chaotic social life of corruption. For corruption is not an object or a disease agent that can be isolated and attacked; it is rather a shifting “relation between official-unofficial, formal-informal, public-private” (Visvanathan 2008:53) and a proliferating effect of these modern distinctions.

A technical, legalistic approach to eradicating corruption can only go so far before stalling. If corruption “stems from taxonomy, the power to classify and declassify” (Visvanathan 2008:53), then the law, as a key institutional embodiment of the modern will to classify, can hardly be relied upon to cure what, in fact, it generates. New laws will produce new transgressions; exceptions will erupt at the limit of the law and fray its neat seams. These impasses will in turn produce more interpretive wrangling over what is and is not corrupt, ongoing amendments to existing laws, and/or calls for better laws in a never-ending chase for perfection and control.

Perhaps it is not corruption that is a problem, as Sumit suggested, but structural inequality propped up by the state and by laws. What if one considers corruption not as the fallout of a poorly designed system but as the outcome of the logic of modern bureaucracy—the hierarchical and alienating system of formal rules, routines, and relations typified by the state and the law as public institutions—that seeks but fails to rationalize all aspects of social and political life (Weber 1968).

I find Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (1992) analysis of the complexity and polluted nature of the public realm in colonial India to be useful here. He argues that the street and the bazaar functioned not as ordered and civic public arenas but as dangerous spaces; they allowed a muddling of categories—outside/inside, strange/familiar—that should, ideally, remain separate. I suggest that we might want to see the state in a similar way. If we suspend the ideal of the liberal state as a perfectly public, civic, and rule-bound realm, then what we confront is a much more chaotic, even malevolent arena that is partially

privatized and unequally accessible. The state-as-is is an unfamiliar realm for most, made up of faceless rules and impenetrable strangers with whom one is forced to transact and haggle. Corruption can be viewed as a way of rendering familiar the strangely alienating terrain of bureaucratic unknowns and incomprehensibles. It vernacularizes the formal “grammar of a bureaucracy” (Visvanathan 2008:55) by using deal making, gift-giving, and personal relationships to upend abstract impersonalism and rule-boundedness. Corruption, then, is not so much a symptom of a bad system that is imperfectly rationalized but the outcome of the modern bureaucratic itself. Instituting more laws, then, will not only expand an already distended state but also proliferate bureaucratic rules and lifeways that generate corrupt acts in the first place. Dismantling corruption through laws is bound to fail at its limits, as new laws will continue to produce corruption as an unruly excess. Although such laws against corruption might provide temporary relief to some, they will not materialize an equal society.

Maybe by searching for the perfect law to end corruption, construed narrowly, we are deflecting attention from the issue we ought to take seriously. And that is, in Sumit’s words, how to “overturn the anthropology of power” or the ideologies and practices that produce and sustain structural hierarchies and violence, which are at once enounced in the state and the law and go beyond them.

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Corruption and “Culture” in Anthropology and in Nigeria

by Daniel Jordan Smith

This article examines the publication and reception of my book about corruption in Nigeria as a form of ethnographic evidence that is useful to interrogate the fraught relationship between the concepts of culture and corruption. The evidence points to multiple misunderstandings—but also to the powerful political purposes for which accusations of corruption (and, more specifically, notions of corruption as a cultural problem) can be wielded. This essay builds on work in anthropology that takes seriously the reality that the people we study may read what we write, and it uses local reactions to a monograph about corruption as analytical leverage to illuminate the anthropology of corruption. But this article takes the examination of local responses to a book about corruption one step further, comparing them with the reception and critiques generated within anthropology. I argue that, in juxtaposing these reactions, we can see the many ways that concepts of corruption and culture—and the understanding of the relationship between the two—can be mobilized for different purposes and with different effects.

In 2007, Princeton University Press published my first book, A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria (Smith 2007). The book examined the seeming paradox that ordinary Nigerians are at once victims, vocal critics, and complicit participants in Nigeria’s infamous corruption. I argued that, in Nigeria, the term corruption is a widely accepted, polyvalent signifier for a range of political, social, and cultural practices related to the reproduction of inequality, about which Nigerians are highly ambivalent.

On a mid-December morning in 2013, roughly 7 years after my book about corruption in Nigeria was first published, and by which time I thought I had experienced all of the reactions that it would produce, I received a letter in my anthropology department mailbox that totally upended that assumption. It was in a thick envelope, and the return address showed that it came from the office of a lawyer in Southern California who bore a Nigerian name. As I read the nine-page, single-spaced letter, my initial intrigue was quickly transformed into mortification. The lawyer represented a Nigerian doctor who had run a state-level AIDS program in my field site. My book recounted things that some of my interlocutors in a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) had said about his actions with regard to a World Bank-funded call for proposals in which local NGOs would compete for small grants. I described how people had told me that the doctor felt obliged to award one of the grants to an NGO created by the state governor’s wife and how the doctor himself was interested in creating his own NGO (even though he was a government official and had a hand in awarding the grants). The story took up only two pages in my book, and although I was simply reporting what others had told me, rather than attempting to prove its veracity, there is little doubt that the passages implied that the doctor might have engaged in corruption. The lawyer’s letter informed me that, unless I made a public apology, worked with Princeton University Press to recall all copies of the book and print a new edition that included a retraction, and paid the doctor half a million dollars, they would sue me. The letter was copied to the director of Princeton University Press.

The first thing that I did was regret using the doctor’s real name in my book. My general practice was to use pseudonyms for everyone but public officials. The doctor was a public official, but he was a minor enough figure that I could have saved both him and me a lot of heartache by giving him another name and maybe changing the details of the story a little to protect his identity. But I had not done that, even though I had done so in many other cases that involved ordinary citizens. The next thing I did was make an appointment with my university’s general counsel. She was both reassuring and frightening. She was reassuring in that she said that, in the United States, libel was difficult to prove. From what she could glean, the doctor had a very weak case. But what she said frightened me on two counts. First, to my horror, she said that the university would not provide any legal representation on my behalf. Because I had published the book with Princeton University Press, my legal relationship in the matter was with the press rather than with the university. Initially, that provided me no comfort, because when I reread my contract with the press (which I did...
not read with great care before I signed it), it said not only that I would be responsible for any costs that I might incur in such a case but also that I might be responsible for Princeton’s costs. The university lawyer said that was typical legal language, but she imagined that, in fact, the press would back me up. Presses have a huge vested interest in protecting freedom of expression, she said, and they would almost surely support me. I was glad for those words, but I had not talked to the press yet, and I barely slept that night.

The second thing that the university lawyer said that scared me was that, while she could assure me that the case appeared to have little merit in American law, she could make no such claims about other countries, where libel laws might be much more friendly to the plaintiff. Pointedly, she said the situation might be entirely different in Nigeria. My mind churned and recoiled at the thought of what it might be like to try to defend myself against a libel suit in the Nigerian judicial system.

The next day, I received an email from the director of Princeton University Press referencing the letter from the Nigerian lawyer and asking me to call him. After asking lots of questions about my book, about the doctor who threatened to sue me, and about the specific relevant passages in the book (which he had read before we spoke), he informed me (to my great relief) that the press retained a law firm for precisely such circumstances. Furthermore, if necessary, their lawyer would represent both the press and me. I should expect to hear from the lawyer shortly, he said.

Within a few days, a telephone call was arranged with a lawyer from a major New York firm, who had been educated at Columbia University. Like the director of the press, she also asked me all kinds of questions about my book, about the doctor, and specifically about the passages in the book over which he threatened to sue me. Within a week or so, she produced a three-page, single-spaced response to the letter from the Nigerian lawyer threatening a lawsuit. Her letter refuted the claims of libel on three primary grounds, in addition to the fact that, in US law, the statute of limitations would have expired: (1) that what I had written was true; (2) that when I wrote it, I believed what I had written had caused the doctor no demonstrable monetary harm. The first two points were backed up by extensive evidence that I provided to the lawyer. Among the most important evidence that I offered was that one of the sources for what I wrote in the book about the doctor later coauthored a chapter with me in another book recounting the same story. In other words, one of my informants added his name to a published piece, thereby buttressing my claim that I had every reason to believe that what I wrote was true. All of this thoroughly undermined any potential libel case, the lawyer said. If the doctor brought his case against me to court in the United States, he would lose, she assured me. But she also cautioned me that many frivolous libel cases are filed with the hope that the defendant might agree to a settlement to avoid the hassle and costs of court. Furthermore, she echoed the Brown University lawyer in cautioning me that things might be entirely different in Nigeria.

After the press’s lawyer sent the letter to the Nigerian lawyer in California, nothing happened. A couple of months later, I had more or less stopped worrying about a lawsuit—although I was still afraid that, on my next trip to Nigeria, the doctor might try to sue me there, or worse. Then, one morning, I arrived at my office and opened my email to find half a dozen emails with the subject line “DANIEL JORDAN SMITH IS A LIAR AND AN ACADEMIC FRAUD.” The doctor had sent the emails to Brown’s president and to every member of my department, as well as, again, to Princeton University Press. The first email made the same claims of defamation contained in the Nigerian lawyer’s original letter. The subsequent emails each contained about a dozen attachments, which the doctor called “supporting documents” for his claim, all of which appeared to be photocopies of project documents associated with the World Bank grant competition that the doctor had overseen.

I forwarded everything to the university’s general counsel and asked for her advice, and I specifically asked about whether I should reach out to Brown’s president (I had already told most but not all of my department colleagues about the threatened lawsuit). She told me that she had already explained everything to the president, and she advised me not to respond to any of the doctor’s emails. I followed her advice, but I did write a note to all of my colleagues in the department to apologize for and explain the barrage of emails and attachments that they had received from the doctor. People wrote back in sympathy, and several said they had assumed the emails were some kind of scam, like those I had written about in my book. They had deleted the messages immediately, not daring to open any of the attachments.

While I was furious at the doctor for his actions, afraid of what he might have in store for me in Nigeria, and concerned that, even though his accusations were baseless, they might still smear my reputation, I also found myself troubled about the ethics of the whole situation, including my own behavior. The worst thing that happened was that the whole incident poisoned my relationship with my friend and colleague in Nigeria—the man who had been one of my main informants and who had coauthored the chapter in another volume that included material corroborating what I had written in my book. I believe the doctor only realized my friend’s central role in the story when the press’s lawyer cited that chapter in her rebuttal to the Nigerian lawyer’s original threats. In my haste to defend myself, I had not fully realized the implications for my friend when I cited him and our jointly authored chapter as evidence against the notion that I had fabricated a libelous story about the doctor. It also made me realize that I had not adequately considered the risks that telling the story in my book might pose to the people who shared that information with me.

My friend eventually wrote letters to the doctor’s boss (the State Ministry of Health) and to the press repudiating his authorship of our chapter. It was an absurd claim—he and I exchanged numerous emails as we worked on the chapter, he had signed an author’s agreement form, and I remember how proud he was when I brought him two copies of the edited volume.
after it was published—but I heard from mutual friends and colleagues in Nigeria that the doctor had threatened him. I felt disappointed and betrayed, but of course I also realized that, in some profound way, I had betrayed my friend as well by using the publication of our chapter in my defense, thereby exposing him to the doctor, and probably by telling the story in my book in the first place.

I interpreted the actions of the doctor as an example of "when corruption fights back" (Adebanwi and Obadare 2011). Whatever sympathy I have developed over the years for the pressures that Nigerian elites experience to engage in corruption (the pressure the doctor felt to award one of the NGO grants to the governor’s wife’s organization was an example) no longer applied to the doctor after his withering attacks on me. But I remain deeply saddened and feel a tremendous amount of guilt (as well as some anger) toward my former friend and colleague. He lied about me to protect himself. But I put him in a position where perhaps he had no choice.

While the most painful part of the entire episode was the destruction of a friendship, over time I also thought a lot more about what this incident revealed about the anthropology of corruption. I decided to write a book about corruption in Nigeria, and to insist on calling the phenomenon I was studying corruption, because Nigerians are unrelenting in their belief that corruption is one of the biggest problems in their society. But the threatened lawsuit and its fallout made me think again about the ethics of fieldwork, writing, and representation; about the various dimensions of power and inequality at work not only in the practices of corruption itself but also in the study of it; and about the potent role that accusations of corruption play in politics—both in Nigeria and in Nigeria’s relationship to the rest of the world.

With regard to the ethics of fieldwork, writing, and representation, I collected most of the material for my book while I was ostensibly working on other projects. It was only in retrospect that I realized I had so much data about corruption. I had not intended to collect it, except during a last stint of fieldwork before writing the book. Had my research been more unethical because people did not know that things they were telling me were for research and would be published in a book? Nearly every anthropologist who has submitted a protocol to an institutional review board has faced the challenge of how to address the issue of consent with regard to participant observation. I assume that I am like most anthropologists in that I tend to think of every minute I am in Nigeria as fieldwork and participant observation. The idea of seeking consent for every moment of social interaction seems impossible, even absurd. And yet, in retrospect, I wonder whether it was ethical to describe the things that I observed or report conversations that I heard without the explicit consent of the people involved, even if each person was protected with a pseudonym and stories were slightly altered to protect people’s identities. Of course, in the case of the doctor and my friend, the worry was more concrete. In hindsight, I made a mistake in using the doctor’s real name, even though he may have fit the criterion of being a public figure that I (and many others) used in making such decisions. Perhaps I also made a mistake in citing the coauthored chapter to defend myself against the accusation of libel. Even though I firmly believe what I wrote was true, and even though the coauthored chapter provided legal evidence that I had every reason to believe what I wrote in my book to be true, just because I told the truth does not mean what I did was right.

My interpretation that the doctor’s actions were an example of corruption fighting back and my belief that my friend turned against me because the doctor threatened him (indeed, I would not be surprised if he threatened not only his livelihood but also his life) provide me a degree of respite from my own sense of guilt. They also temper my feeling of betrayal by my friend. But that relief is only partial, because I imagine that my friend must feel betrayed by me as well. Although I have often thought, “if only I had disguised the doctor’s identity, this whole ugly mess could have been avoided,” and although I think that is probably true, I also believe that such ethical issues are perhaps too easily papered over by the conventions by which an institutional review board protocol can be approved and by which anthropologists typically try to protect our subjects in our writing.

With regard to the anthropology of corruption, in particular, the whole ordeal reinforced for me how powerful accusations of corruption are in Nigeria, even if they appear to leave many elite politicians unscathed. In his recent book about the history of corruption in Nigeria, Steven Pierce (2016) argues that accusations of corruption have evolved to become a central weapon in Nigerian politics. Despite the widely shared sense that nearly every politician is engaged in corruption, official accusations of corruption can have powerful consequences, partly because they enable the machinery of the state to be used against some while protecting others, but also because, despite its ubiquity, corruption is highly stigmatized. Indeed, it was the paradox of there being almost universal participation in corruption even though it is so thoroughly despised that led me to write my book in the first place.

The doctor’s threatened lawsuit also reminded me of the way that accusations of corruption operate in an unequal world. Although I am convinced that his libel accusations against me had no merit, I also could not help notice the degree to which Nigeria’s reputation for corruption played a role in protecting me, if not legally (because, of course, the case never went to court), at least with regard to my reputation. While I would like to think that I have earned my credibility and deserve the trust of my university, my department colleagues, and Princeton University Press, it is nonetheless remarkable how much the fact that the accusations against me came from a Nigerian affected everyone’s interpretation. The idea that a public figure there would be corrupt was assumed. Furthermore, when my university colleagues received the mass emails with the subject line that I was a liar and an academic fraud, along with the dozens of attachments, it was telling that many of them assumed it was some kind of scam letter, and they never dared to open any of
the documents. While I am, of course, grateful that people believed me, even without really considering any evidence, I could not help but wonder whether the stigma of corruption in Nigeria and the role that such stigma plays in reinforcing our ideas about the global hierarchy would have made it impossible for the doctor to effectively pursue a case against me even if everything he accused me of had, in fact, been true.

Problematising Corruption and Culture

In retrospect, some of my initial experiences in writing and publishing a book about corruption in Nigeria should have better prepared me for the challenges and quandaries that the doctor’s allegations presented me with. The process of publication and the reception that my book received after it came out offered their own forms of ethnographic evidence not only about the fraught relationship between the concepts of culture and corruption but also regarding issues of ethics and representation when writing about such a politically charged topic. This evidence pointed to multiple misunderstandings—but also to the powerful political purposes for which accusations of corruption (and, more specifically, notions of corruption as a cultural problem) can be wielded. I build on work in anthropology that takes seriously the reality that the people we study may read what we write (Brettell 1993), and particularly on Dorothy Zinn’s (2013) recent effort to use local reactions to her ethnography of corruption in Italy as a further corpus of ethnographic evidence and analytical leverage to illuminate the anthropologies of corruption. But, in this article, I take the examination of local responses to my book about corruption one step further, comparing them with the reception and critiques generated within anthropology. I argue that, in juxtaposing these reactions, we can see the multiple ways that the concepts of corruption and culture—and the understanding of the relationship between the two—can be mobilized for different purposes and with different effects. The ethical quandary produced by the doctor’s threatened lawsuit against me was, in some ways, a culmination of issues I had already confronted in the reception of my book. Even before I received that letter, it had become clear that, in writing about corruption, the ethics of representation inevitably collide with the political uses of corruption and corruption accusations in creating, navigating, and explaining inequality.

In 2007, I traveled to Nigeria with about 30 copies of my book stuffed into my luggage, earmarked for in-laws, friends, and academic colleagues. Many people in the United States had asked me whether I would be afraid to return to Nigeria once the book was in print, given the politically sensitive nature of the topic. I always replied that I was not particularly scared for three reasons. First, I wrote little that was directly threatening to political elites. In fact, my book was really about the ways that ordinary people participated paradoxically in corruption, even as they were also its primary victims and its most vocal critics (Smith 2007). Second, the Nigerian press had long disseminated much more damning and sensational accounts of corruption than anything that I portrayed (Obadare 2009, 2016; see Hasty 2005 for Ghananian examples). Consequently, I doubted that anything I wrote would garner much notice among corrupt Nigerian elites. Finally, no matter how outlandish or credible the accusations of corruption against individual Nigerians might be, it is remarkable how meager the consequences always are (Gore and Pratten 2003). If Nigerian corruption and corrupt Nigerian politicians were immune to the torrent of media stories and popular rumors and complaints generated within the country, there was little to fear, I thought in 2007, from an academic anthropology book published across the Atlantic.

Still, as I approached customs officials outside the baggage claim area at Murtala Mohammed International Airport in Lagos, I could feel the sweat accumulating on my brow as I began to imagine their possible reaction to seeing so many colorful book covers with the bold title A Culture of Corruption. Given that more innocuous contents in my luggage had caused me many delays on arrival over the years—as officers engaged in a painstaking examination of my bags, hoping that I would offer some kind of “dash” to speed things up—I was afraid that 30 copies of my book would create a big opportunity for them and a gigantic hassle for me. So, as I approached the uniformed officers, I adopted an air of confidence, greeting them heartily in pidgin English and adding Igbo for the man whose name tag revealed his origin in Nigeria’s east. It always seemed like customs officers, police, scam artists, and even market vendors could sense whether foreigners were new, naive, and vulnerable or savvier veterans who knew Nigeria. Whether my feigned confidence had its intended effect or I was just lucky (customs officers do not have time to search everyone’s baggage), I will never know, but they waived me through without opening my bags.

While my airport arrival produced a very short period of angst about whether the copies of my book would result in being questioned, extorted for hefty bribe, or even detained, once the books were safely in country, I began the exciting but also anxiety-producing process of distributing copies. What would people think? Would they be offended by the title (which was not the title I originally proposed to my press, and about which I myself was deeply ambivalent)? Would they think I had somehow besmirched Nigeria—or insulted them—by writing about an issue for which Nigeria already had such a bad global reputation? Might they—as I hoped—be pleased that the book examined corruption in Nigeria in a way that attempted to privilege ordinary people’s perspectives? And regardless of whether they liked the fact that I had written an ethnographic account of corruption, would they think that what I wrote was accurate?

Already, by the time I reached Nigeria late that spring, I had begun to receive feedback from the scholarly world of anthropology, and there would be much more to come in the ensuing years, both positive and negative, even before the doctor’s threat of a lawsuit. While the academic reception of the book was obviously important for my professional career, what my affines, friends, and colleagues in Nigeria thought affected me much more personally. I knew I would experience Nigerian
feedback about the book differently than how I received academic criticism or commendation. But what I did not anticipate was how much more I would learn about corruption and about its relationship to culture by comparing and contrasting the reactions to the book in academic anthropology and among Nigerians themselves. Of course, responses to the book were diverse in both the academy and in Nigeria. But the worries, themes, issues, and questions that stood out in each realm signaled strikingly different perspectives and preoccupations.

Rather than privileging one set of responses as more revealing or accurate than the other, I argue that, by comparing them, it is possible to understand things about corruption, about the anthropology of corruption, and about the perceived relationship between corruption and culture both in the academy and in Nigeria that one might miss—or at least that I certainly missed—in constructing an account that did not benefit from the reactions of these different audiences.

Corruption and Culture in Anthropology

In 2005, when I submitted the manuscript of my book to Princeton University Press for peer review, my working title was “The Nigerian Factor: Corruption and Its Discontents.” The “Nigerian factor” was a popular local expression to signal or exaggerate misuses of culture and corruption in the title presented considerable problems. First, I knew well that, in anthropology, many people believed that corruption was a stigmatizing Western label that oversimplified more complex social practices (I have more to say about this below). Second, I was well aware that the concept of culture itself was contested in the very discipline that took it as its object of study. But much worse, the title “A Culture of Corruption” could be seen as suggesting that the book would offer a “culturalist” argument, in which corruption in Nigeria would be blamed on some kind of traditional or naturalized notion of “Nigerian culture.” That was the last thing I wanted to suggest with my book title, much less argue in the ethnography.

I raised these issues with my editor, and while he expressed some sympathy, he suggested that I should leave the marketing of my book to the people who know how to do that and that I should feel confident that my scholarship would be judged on its merits, not by the book’s title. I accepted this reasoning and approved moving forward. In part, I succumbed because I did not feel I had much power. I was in the fourth year of a tenure-track position and needed my book to come out soon. But it was not only my urgency and perception of powerlessness that led me to accept the title. I wrote the book the way I did in the first place because I was struck by how obsessed Nigerians were with the problem of corruption in their society. Even though Nigerian corruption has many of its roots in colonialism, and despite the fact that the term is deployed in global political and development discourse in stigmatizing ways that blame the victims, it was obvious to me that Nigerians understood corruption as something profoundly real and consequential in their society, and they saw themselves as deeply implicated in it. Furthermore, with regard to the concept of culture, despite its misuses, a version that accounts for history and political economy and which includes institutions and practices as well as beliefs and symbols still appealed to me, despite its slipperiness.

So, while I sometimes still wince at the title of my book, I am ultimately responsible for it. In retrospect, reactions to the title, in particular, have been emblematic of what I have learned about corruption, about the relationship between the concepts of culture and corruption, and about the anthropology of corruption overall on the basis of responses to the book more generally in both the academy and Nigeria.

Two anecdotes represent widespread perspectives in academic anthropology regarding corruption and, specifically, the relationship between corruption and culture. The first happened shortly after the book came out. I was invited to Cambridge University in the United Kingdom, where I gave two talks—one in African studies and one in social anthropology. Although I presented somewhat different lectures to each audience, both talks covered the main arguments in my book. It was, in part, the contrast between the reception of my work and the questions I received in each venue that pointed to some patterns I have observed more widely in academic anthropology’s point of view on corruption.

After the African studies lecture, where the audience was almost entirely Africanists from multiple disciplines and included several Nigeria experts, the most critical questions focused on the extent to which I had taken proper account of history and whether I had given adequate weight to factors in the global political economy in my explanation of corruption in Nigeria. These seemed like immanently appropriate questions that probed what I think were weaknesses in my book. But no one seemed concerned about calling the phenomenon I was examining “corruption.”

In contrast, after the talk in social anthropology, both in the formal question and discussion period and at an informal reception afterward, several people were concerned—indeed, some seemed downright angry—that I had decided to call what
I was studying “corruption.” Their discontent seemed to stem from two main worries. The first was that, by accepting the label corruption, I was buying into and furthering the stigmatizing function that corruption accusations serve in the unequal power dynamics that mark the relationship between the Global North and the Global South. In other words, the characterization of places like Nigeria as corrupt blames internal social practices for problems like underdevelopment, masking the dominant role rich nations, multinational institutions, and the global economic system play in creating and reproducing Nigeria’s problems. In fact, I have much sympathy for this view, but my defense was that I did not (and still do not) think that a global political economic explanation should preclude attention to how things actually unfold in everyday life in places like Nigeria. These global forces have their impact locally, and people on the ground have considerable agency. It is impossible to spend time in Nigeria and not feel Nigerians’ agency, including when it comes to corruption.

The second concern was much more problematic from my point of view. In addition to worrying that the branding of places like Nigeria as “corrupt” blamed the victims, some folks seemed to think that the very concept of corruption itself was ethnocentric and misleading. This criticism I found disconcerting and worrisome for anthropology. Indeed, my view was (and is) that all of the best work in anthropology about corruption has been keenly attentive to blurring boundaries between, but also distinguishing between, practices that might best be understood as the legacy or instantiation of a gift economy, face-to-face kinship and patron-client relations, and so on and those that are more accurately described as corruption (Blundo 2007; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006; Haller and Shore 2005). My own book was motivated by the desire to examine the complex ways that Nigerians both blur the boundaries and make and understand these distinctions. While I would be the first to acknowledge that certain practices that Westerners might describe as corruption are experienced as something else by Nigerians, to me it was absurd to imagine that the concept of corruption was inappropriate to study (much less criticize) how these states function in local, everyday contexts. The fact that Nigerians recognize corruption as a real problem in their society is a testament to the complex ways their country is integrated into a global world; to dismiss it as merely a Western label is tantamount to a negation of that fact.

The second anecdote speaks to anthropologists’ curious allergy to the concept of culture, a discomfort that is, at the very least, ironic given our role in promoting and popularizing it. The particular unease about analyzing corruption as something cultural points to both the well-founded reasons why anthropologists are wary of our own master concept and to the ways that discarding it entirely is, in my view, the equivalent of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The story begins at an annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) a few years after my book was published. One of my best friends from another university, with whom I had gone to graduate school, told me that a senior scholar whom he liked and very much respected (and whose work I also respected, but whom I did not know personally) had just told him that she had recently read my book and liked it a lot. It sat on her bookshelf for almost 2 years unopened, she told him, because she so hated the title. Of course, I cringed at this account, again remembering my own ambivalence about the title and my (now seemingly well-warranted) fears that it would signal something about the contents to anthropology audiences that I did not intend.

For reasons that I have already alluded to (such as worries about ethnocentrism and blaming the victims), but also because anthropology only began to study the nation-state and state-related topics in recent decades, it is difficult to find many anthropological publications from more than 20 years ago that label themselves as being about corruption. To the extent that anthropology dealt with the issue, it tended to cast it in relation to gifting, reciprocity, patronage, and so on (Yan 1996; Yang 1994). Addressing corruption per se was left mostly to political science (Chabal and Daloz 1999; Heidenheimer 2002; Nye 1967; Routley 2016). And when anthropologists finally took on the topic of corruption directly, accounts from political science were appropriated or criticized, at least implicitly, on
the basis of how they crafted their arguments about culture. On the one hand, from the anthropologists’ point of view, the worst accounts were those that adopted so-called culturalist arguments, attributing corruption in postcolonial societies to the legacy of tradition or to essentialized notions of culture. On the other hand, in anthropology, the most widely cited and respected scholarship from political science that focuses on corruption (in African studies, the best example would be Bayart’s *The State in Africa: the Politics of the Belly* [1993], but see also Joseph [1987] and Ekeh [1975]) is that which exhibits tremendous knowledge about local context—in short, those works that best take into account culture. As anthropologists have begun to take seriously the state as an object of study (Gupta 1995, 2012), it has become impossible not to address corruption. But, even now, few anthropologists seem comfortable with the pairing of culture and corruption.

A few months after the AAA meetings, I received an invitation from this same scholar to come and speak at her university, which I did the following year. In addition to giving a public lecture, I also made a guest appearance in one of my host’s undergraduate classes, for which she had assigned my book to her students. During the class, I told the story about what my friend had said about my host’s reaction to my book title. I did so not to embarrass her but to try to reinforce a point I wanted to make about the politics of studying corruption in anthropology. After the class, my host and I had a very productive conversation about these issues. As I suspected, her aversion to the title *A Culture of Corruption* was precisely that it seemed to signal that the contents might include an argument that reduced corruption to some kind of African or Nigerian cultural problem—in short, a culturalist argument. As should be clear by now, I think it is possible—although not easy—to include culture in an account of corruption without resorting to culturalist assumptions.

Corruption and Culture in Nigeria

A few weeks after I had given copies of my book to several friends in the southeastern Nigerian city of Owerri—a place where many of the events depicted in the book occurred—I had the opportunity to get together with them over beers. After a couple of rounds, I finally mustered the courage to ask whether anyone had had the time to read the book and, if so, what they had thought. The reactions were initially positive, with people saying in Igbo and pidgin English that what I had written was true. They also teased me a bit, saying that little did they realize that, during all those years that I had spent hanging around, I was actually gathering all this information for a book. Finally, one of my friends said, “I love the book, but there is just one thing I hate.” I asked what that was, and he said, “I don’t like the title. Corruption is not part of our culture.” Like a bad penny, my worst fears about the title were manifesting themselves in Nigeria as well as in academic anthropology. Nevertheless, I asked him to elaborate. He continued, “In our grandfathers’ time, people acted with integrity. People who stole property or acted in ways that violated the community’s laws were severely punished, sometimes even completely ostracized or killed. There was nothing like the corruption we have now. Our culture is not corrupt.” Recognizing that my friend was invoking a notion of culture as tradition and as a kind of romanticized nostalgia for an imagined past, I asked, “So by culture, you mean Igbo and Nigerian customs and traditions, something that characterized your forefather’s time rather than the present?” He nodded and said, “Yes, of course.”

I then went on to say that what I meant by culture was something different. I explained that what I meant in the book by culture was the things people do, the ways they think, and the patterns of behavior that are occurring in the present. I did not mean to imply anything about Igbo traditions or what society was like in the distant past. At this, my friend laughed and said, “Oh, well if that is what you mean by culture, then in Nigeria today we have a completely corrupt culture.” This was followed by others chiming in about the depths of corruption in contemporary Nigerian society, including a familiar refrain about bad leaders.

The narrative of bad leadership as the explanation for corruption in Nigeria was something I had observed many times in the press, in scholarship, and in ordinary Nigerians’ everyday discourse. And there is no doubt that Nigeria has had some bad and very corrupt leaders whose conduct has contributed significantly to the country’s corruption problems. But, in my book, I had argued that average citizens were frequently participants in corruption, often with a sense that there was no other way to access state-controlled social resources, and with the effect of protecting or making corruption at higher levels even more intractable. I had also argued that, in addition to blaming bad leadership, ordinary Nigerians were remarkably critical of their own complicity. I wanted to see whether, several years later, among these friends who had now read the book, that argument still held up, so I recounted a story that I had told in the book about a group of men discussing the Jerry Rawlings coup in Ghana in which he executed former leaders, ostensibly to rid the country of corruption. That conversation progressed, with one man saying that, in Nigeria, a dozen leaders executed would not be enough to make a dent in corruption. Someone else said that a planeload would not be enough, drawing a laugh. Another suggested a shipload would not be enough, drawing a bigger laugh. But the biggest laugh—because the men thought it was the most true—was when one of them said, essentially, that they would all have to be killed, because anyone who reached such positions of power would act the same way.

As I retold the story, my interlocutors laughed heartily and said, “O wu eziokwu,” Igbo for “it is true.” The conversation continued in that vein, with the men discussing the pressures that people with access to money and power in Nigeria experience to behave corruptly—pressures that come from kin and community, friends and peers, and even from society at large, because a man with wealth and power is supposed to be able to accumulate enough to share generously with his clients. The notion that Nigeria—like other places in Africa—has a “moral
economy” of corruption was introduced and powerfully argued by the French anthropologist Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1999). Similarly, Steven Pierce (2016) traces the emergence of a moral economy of corruption to changes that began in the colonial period that set the stage for Nigeria’s current problems. Both Olivier de Sardan and Pierce emphasize the extent to which behaviors that could be (and often are) labeled as corruption, even by Nigerians, are commonly undertaken to fulfill obligations to kin, community, and networks of patron-clientism. They also point to the complex intersection of state bureaucracy and face-to-face sociality and its role in creating opportunities, and sometimes even imperatives, for corruption.

Although my interlocutors in Nigeria would probably say that the term “moral economy” is “big grammar,” I think that, given the chance, they would recognize and agree with much of what Pierce and Olivier de Sardan say about a moral economy of corruption. However, while Pierce is surely correct to insist that Nigeria’s current predicament of corruption must be historicized and that policies and practices of colonial governance provide much of the explanation for the present situation, ordinary Nigerians are much more likely to blame themselves and their current leaders. To a fault, Nigerians are mostly unwilling, or perhaps unequipped, to blame either the colonial past or contemporary geopolitics for corruption. Of course, one occasionally hears such arguments, but they tend to be proffered by Nigerian academics or by Nigerians who have lived in the diaspora. Most ordinary Nigerians see the country’s problems as primarily homegrown and locally made. Whether one calls it a “moral economy” or “culture,” Nigerians recognize their own agency in the reproduction of corruption. While this view surely lets the West off the hook more than it deserves, perhaps it is not such a bad thing, because it seems likely that the West will continue to operate with its own interests at heart, and only Nigerians will truly have a stake in fixing the country’s problems, corruption or otherwise.

Conclusion

I suspect that anthropologists have begun to study corruption—and call it the study of corruption—because our interlocutors in the places we work have vocally identified it as a real and problematic phenomenon in their societies. Of course, the fact that people in Nigeria—or anywhere else—call something in their society corruption should not lead us to presume that it means the same thing or functions in the same way everywhere. Not only are meanings and practices of corruption shaped by cultural context, they are also revealing windows onto other aspects of social life.

I have suggested that the reason anthropology has been timid in studying corruption is because the concept smacks of ethnocentrism. Anthropologists have shied away from studying corruption because it has been used as a stigmatizing label to blame other cultures for problems that have wider historical and political economic underpinnings. As reactions to my book suggest, just because we attempt to study corruption ethnographically, in context, does not mean that we easily or automatically overcome the problem that, no matter what one says about corruption in a place like Nigeria, one risks continuing and contributing to stigma and stereotypes simply by talking about corruption at all.

If Nigerians have been obsessed with corruption even as anthropologists have been disinclined to study it, Nigerians and anthropologists also differ markedly with regard to using culture as an explanation for corruption. Both examples illustrate the powerful ways that ideas about culture can be mobilized in explanations of corruption. Anthropologists’ discomfort with offering culture as a cause of corruption is mostly related to the problems with so-called culturalist accounts. Such narratives attribute causality to essentialist or naturalized notions of culture. Culturalist accounts tend to blame the victims: they assume that there is something inherent about Nigeria and Nigerians that makes them corrupt. Such accounts are indeed highly problematic. But by comparing anthropologists’ positions on the relationship between culture and corruption to ordinary Nigerians’ views, I have tried to show that discarding culture in explaining corruption is, in its own way, myopic.

In contrast to anthropologists, ordinary Nigerians are quick to attribute corruption to their contemporary culture (with the caveat that “culture” is also sometimes deployed to refer to an idealized past that contrasts romantically with the present). While it is certainly worth worrying whether Nigerians have absorbed globally circulating culturalist accounts and participate in blaming themselves for things that have their causes elsewhere, I think that such a perspective is too facile. Instead, I take Nigerians seriously when they call corruption “the Nigerian factor” and when they tell stories that reflect their own complicity in reproducing practices that they also lament. On the one hand, Nigerians should probably blame corruption on colonialism and their country’s current position in the global political economy more than they do. On the other hand, perhaps their perspective is a healthy one, because it seems much more likely that Nigerians will successfully address the scourge of corruption if they focus on what they can do themselves rather than wait for the world to redress the wrongs of colonialism or fix the inequities of the contemporary global economy.

If Nigeria has something like a culture of corruption—and I remain as hesitant to use the phrase now as when I consented to the title of my book—then probably only Nigerians can change it for the better, even (or perhaps especially) if we acknowledge that others are implicated in Nigeria’s current troubles. As I often tell my friends in Nigeria, they have good reason to be skeptical about the intentions of those from the outside who try to tell them what to do. And as the repercussions for my friend and friendship in the wake of the doctor’s threatened lawsuit attest, even those of us who would like to believe we have good intentions find it difficult to navigate corruption and the power of its accusations.

I remain unsure how best to think about the doctor’s threatened lawsuit against me. In my most confident moments, I
simply regret not giving him a pseudonym and thereby sav-
ing my Nigerian friend and me the trouble of his wrath. I will
always regret the damage that I did to that friendship in de-
fending myself. In less secure moments, I revert to some of my
original fears that writing about corruption in a place like Ni-
geria almost inevitably contributes to the label’s stigmatizing,
victim-blaming force, perhaps no matter what one says. And
yet it is Nigerians’ insistence that corruption is a real and det-
rimental problem in their society that convinces me that trying
to understand it is an important anthropological project.

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How Corrupt Are Universities? Audit Culture, Fraud Prevention, and the Big Four Accountancy Firms

by Cris Shore

Corruption narratives, like witchcraft accusations, offer a lens for analyzing social relations, economic interests, and hidden structures of power. Developing this theme, I examine discourses of corruption in the context of growing concerns about fraud prevention and anti-corruption in universities. Moving beyond critiques of university administrations as bureaucratic, self-serving entities whose interests are increasingly antithetical to the academic mission of the university, I ask, What is corruption in academia and how does this assumed problem relate to academic capitalism and the rise of audit culture? The empirical context for my study is the extraordinary increase in institutionalized fraud-prevention programs, particularly those offered by the “Big Four” accountancy firms. Taking as my case study the introduction of a whistle-blower hotline at one Australasian university, I examine the politics and interests behind such schemes. The increasing involvement of accountancy firms in nonauditing work, including anti-corruption services, illustrates how corruption narratives operate as market-making strategies. I examine how commercialization, risk management, and auditing proliferate anti-corruption initiatives and how audit firms collude in the risk and corruption that they claim to ameliorate. I conclude by assessing the implications for the anthropology of corruption of the growing penetration of universities by an increasingly commercially focused tax industry that, some argue, cannot even be trusted to regulate itself.

Neoliberalized Universities and the Growth of Corruption

Over the past decade, concerns about rising corruption have spread to one of the world’s oldest and most hallowed institutions: the university. However, given the difficulties of studying corruption, let alone measuring it, the question of how corrupt universities are is not one we can answer with any accuracy. As Philip Altbach (2015:7) observes, despite the plethora of indicators for measuring and ranking universities by the quality of their research and teaching, credit ratings, reputation, and other factors—such as impact, innovation, graduate employability, and the student experience—“no one has developed a worldwide academic corruption index.” Not yet, at least. Rather than assessing whether universities are becoming more corrupt or what indicators might serve to measure and corroborate such claims, I use these questions to interrogate two broader conceptual issues. The first is the “performativity” of the word corruption, or how it is put to work, particularly given the difficulties of defining what constitutes corruption in academia. My use of the term performativity draws on the idea of “speech acts” developed by anthropologists and philosophers of language (Austin 1962; Butler 1997; Turner 1988), who argue that the work of speech and communication is not simply to communicate but also to consummate action. In this sense, narratives about university corruption work to legitimize forms of action, empower certain individuals—typically accountants, risk managers, and anti-corruption experts—and bring particular kinds of social reality into being. This is also what Ian Hacking (2002:108) termed “dynamic nominalism”; the way social classifications create new categories of problem and subjectivity.

The second issue concerns the major changes in the organization of universities over the past two decades as a result of successive waves of neoliberal reform that most Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries have implemented over that time and the problems that these changes raise for combating corruption. These reforms have resulted in a growing marketization of the university and have introduced a raft of new forms of accountability and control based on principles of financial accountancy and new public management. Their initial aim was to introduce economic and administrative efficiencies into the governance of academia, promoting innovation and entrepreneurialism. But this “enterprise university model” (Marginson and Consadine 2000)—what Slaughter and Leslie (1997) labeled “academic capitalism”—has produced both new opportunities and new...
cleavages. More important, these changes also reflect the rise of “audit culture” (Power 1997; Strathern 2000). The term audit culture refers to the way that the techniques, practices, and rationalities of accountancy have expanded beyond the domains of finance to become major principles of organization and instruments of management throughout both public- and private-sector organizations (Shore and Wright 2015). Audit culture is an assemblage of different policy processes, accounting technologies, and moral injunctions that exert power through the normalization and naturalization of particular ways of thinking and financialized forms of management. In academia, audit culture reaches down from government officials, university leadership teams, and faculty managers to heads of schools, departments, and individual academic staff in ever-more pervasive drives to measure and improve staff productivity and performance (Shore 2008; Shore and Wright 1999).

The extent to which academic capitalism has led to increased corruption is debatable. However, two recent reports by the United Nations (UN) Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO; Hallak and Poisson 2007) and Transparency International (2013a) argue that corruption in higher education has become a matter of mounting international concern for governments, educators, students, and other stakeholders. It is also a growing problem in China, where some have described it as a “cancer” (Yang 2015). Corruption in universities is not a new phenomenon, but what is new, according to Chapman and Lindner (2016:247), is a “unique convergence of pressures that is creating heightened threat to the integrity of the higher education enterprise worldwide.” Transparency International (2013b) identifies four factors creating the conditions for corruption to flourish. First, declining public funding for higher education and the erosion of salaries. Second, a corresponding emphasis on universities generating their own income streams, often by raising tuition fees, increasing pressure on academics to win external grants and commercialize the results of their research, or developing for-profit auxiliary businesses, including real estate speculation. Third, an intensification of pressures on academics to publish their research in top-tiered journals as universities seek to raise their national and international standing and reputation by improving their position in world university rankings. And finally, the expectation that universities should generate their own funds has resulted in institutions being granted far greater administrative autonomy. To these, we might add a fifth factor: by weakening state controls and established regulatory practices, neoliberal policies have opened up “vast extralegal spaces of opportunity for appropriation and influence” (Muir 2016:135; see also Comaroff and Comaroff 2006). In a climate of budget cuts and increasing competition for status and resources, these trends have encouraged more “flexible” approaches to bending the rules and interpreting what constitutes acceptable practice (Chapman and Lindner 2016:47). As Heyneman observes:

competition for resources, fame and notoriety place extraordinary pressures on higher education institutions. The weaker ones, those with an absence of control or managerial strength, are most prone to corruption. In some instances, corruption has invaded whole systems of higher education and threatens the reputation of research products and graduates regardless of their guilt or innocence. (Heyneman 2013:101)

According to the director of UNESCO’s International Institute for Education, academic fraud has become so widespread that it now poses a “serious threat” to public trust in educational institutions and performance and to the “integrity and reliability of certification of higher education” (Hallak and Poisson 2007:3).

In this article, I consider these pressures and reflect on how debates about corruption in higher education are being framed. I also question the assumptions about the causes of corruption, including the oft-repeated argument that “the roots of corrupt practices lie in a lack of transparency and accountability” or the absence of “strong management” (Transparency International 2013:exiii). Moving beyond questions of how corrupt universities are, I examine the interests behind efforts to combat corruption in academia. Discourses about the dangers that corruption poses to public trust in universities, I argue, are both instrumental and performative, not only serving internal managerial agendas but also creating ways to open universities up to external financial interests and for-profit service providers. Paradoxically, many of the problems that the Transparency International nongovernmental organization and anti-corruption agencies identify, including procurement fraud and collusion, are often exacerbated by the very agencies employed to combat such practices. If the same logics that fuel corruption are also driving anti-corruption programs, where does this leave the future of the university?

My argument is set out in four parts. First, following brief remarks about anthropological approaches to corruption, I take up Roscigno’s provocative idea of looking at university administration as a new form of organized crime (2015). While Roscigno’s comparisons are largely rhetorical, I suggest that they nevertheless highlight significant trends arising from the increasing power that has accrued to university managers and senior administrators. These trends illustrate how risk and audit have become prevalent themes in university governance, replacing previous notions of public management and professional integrity. I also consider the question of defining corruption in the university context and reflect briefly on different varieties of academic corruption. Second, drawing on fieldwork in New Zealand, I describe one university’s attempts to combat corruption by introducing a whistle-blower hotline. Tracing the history of this and similar initiatives across Australasia, I ask what drives these programs and what they reveal about the effects of corruption narratives. As I illustrate, the “Big Four” accountancy firms play an increasingly dominant role in the burgeoning anti-corruption services market—a market that these firms themselves have helped to create. However, as the third section shows, these firms have lamentable records in terms of

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their own involvement with fraud, raising serious questions about collusion and conflicts of interest. Finally, I conclude by considering the effect of increasing university commercialization and institutionalized antifraud initiatives and what this reveals about audit culture’s impact on the university’s mission.

Anthropology, Corruption, and Anti-corruption

Anthropological approaches to the study of corruption have typically highlighted two important methodological points. The first is that corruption is neither a stable nor a universal category and that its meanings, and the behaviors that people call "corrupt," vary cross-culturally. This makes corruption hard to define and harder still to measure or compare. Transparency International’s highly influential Corruption Perceptions Index is not objective but subjective: what it measures are simply the impressions ("perceptions") of individuals and experts around the world that Transparency International selects for its survey (Whyte 2015:4). Moreover, public perceptions about corruption in particular countries are themselves often shaped by Transparency International’s own Corruption Perceptions Index in a self-reinforcing feedback loop. Institutional definitions of corruption are therefore often both narrowly focused and ethnocentric. This is particularly evident in the World Bank’s (1997) definition of corruption as “the abuse of public office for private gain.” Every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing, and this definition, by confining corruption to the public sector, effectively rules out corruption as a problem for the private sector, which has significant implications when it comes to institutionalizing anti-corruption initiatives.

The second point is that discourses about corruption and its solution provide a useful anthropological lens for analyzing wider social structures and cultural relations. Like witchcraft accusations, corruption narratives reveal a great deal about the abuse of entrusted power and the ruthless breaking up of higher education. 

1. Every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing, and this analysis of corruption may not produce any definitive answers or solutions, like myth, it can reveal some of the fundamental dilemmas and contradictions that underlie any social system. 

2. See also Parkin’s commentary on Csordas’s essay on “Morality as a Culture System,” where he writes, "If you want to study happiness, then start with misery. Similarly, the entry points for a study of morality are its negative aspects" (Csordas et al. 2013:538).

3. The way both require explicit or tacit governmental support from politicians whose policies are complicit in creating these changed circumstances; and

4. The extraction of income from—and ultimate harm done to—well-intentioned families, adjunct lecturers, and the intellectual mission of public higher education.

"University Bureaucracy as Organized Crime": Administrative Capture and Institutionalized Rent Seeking

One inspiration for this article was a polemical article in the journal CounterPunch titled "University Bureaucracy as Organized Crime," written by Vincent Roscigno (2015), a professor of Sociology at Ohio State University. Roscigno engages in what he calls a “sociological thought experiment” to ask whether the “administrative bloating of public universities and the harm it has caused (is) akin to organized crime.” Admitting that this seems far-fetched, he points out four troubling yet intriguing similarities:

1. the hierarchical, bureaucratic, and coordinated structure of both;
2. the accruing of riches at the top among a bloated cadre of high-level senior managers who sometimes set their own reward structures with little constraint or accountability to faculty or their increasingly indebted students, and who abide by the logic that higher education is but a commodity to be sold to customers through eye-candy, window-dressing investigations in buildings, cafeterias, sports grounds, and high-visibility athletics programs;
3. the way both require explicit or tacit governmental support from politicians whose policies are complicit in creating these changed circumstances; and
4. the extraction of income from—and ultimate harm done to—well-intentioned families, adjunct lecturers, and the intellectual mission of public higher education.

These processes, he concludes, ultimately erode the intellectual and engagement goals on which higher education was founded. Indeed, in lieu of hiring new faculty to replace retiring faculty or building on intellectual strengths, the university bureaucrat’s solution to budgetary issues now centers, more often than not, on the hiring of those in research areas flush with grant money—of which universities want a sizeable cut (Lewis and Shore 2017)—or cheaper and all-the-more-exploitable adjunct lecturers, who typically hold PhDs but are underpaid, have limited benefits, and receive only temporary contracts.

This is not "corruption" as conventionally understood (i.e., bribery, embezzlement, deliberate deception, fraud, or abuse of public office), and yet there are similarities (what Wittgenstein might term "family resemblances") with organized crime. Foremost among these is the "personal financial windfall for university presidents, provosts, and executive deans—a professional class of non-teaching personnel to whom the rewards and power of today’s university bureaucracies increasingly accrue" (Roscigno 2015; see also Shore and Wright 2017). Another point of comparison is the emphasis placed on capturing rents and the ruthless breaking up of higher education to release its revenue-making potential: that is, these processes all entail opening up universities so that business and commercial interests can appropriate their assets—
what Barber, Donnelly, and Rizvi (2013) call “unbundling” the university.

Many academics would view such practices—including university administrations taking a large percentage of research grants to cover “overheads” or allowing confidentiality agreements on industry-sponsored research—as forms of corruption insofar as they constitute abuse of the purposes for which those funds were intended. The point, however, is that most of the policies and practices associated with university commercialization conveniently sidestep the definitional issue of what constitutes corruption; that is, technically speaking, such actions cannot be corruption proper ("abuse of public office for private gain") because the public-private distinction is blurred. Just as universities have become repositioned as transnational business corporations operating in a competitive global knowledge economy (Wright and Shore 2017), many British, Australian, and New Zealand universities now set individual financial performance targets for external grant revenue that each academic is expected to raise as part of their job description (Grove 2015). Academic entrepreneurship that generates new income streams for the university has not only become a contractual duty; university managers now increasingly define private or commercial funding as a “public good” (Amsler and Shore 2015).

Varieties of Corruption in Higher Education

Corruption in higher education manifests itself in numerous forms including bribery, embezzlement, fraud, extortion, favoritism, nepotism, cronism, ghost teachers, unauthorized tutoring, unfair promotions, misuse of public property, research misconduct, cheating, and plagiarism. (Osipian 2009:183)

While the risks of corruption in universities may appear obvious, its complex manifestations make definitions problematic, as Osipian (2009) suggests. Certainly universities are prone to fraud and corruption. In the 1980s, I worked in an Italian university and experienced directly Italy’s entrenched system of clientelism, or raccomandazione (Zinn 2001), and the scams and ingenious practices that people deploy to bypass bureaucratic hurdles. Cheating and rorting, I discovered, were considered the norm (Shore 1989).1 The market rates for writing and translating someone else’s thesis or sitting their examination were virtually public knowledge. Giving public-sector jobs to relatives, clients, or supporters was so pervasive that it hardly registered as illegal or immoral (Day 2011). But what I found particularly pervasive was a different kind of corruption, one based on institutionalized forms of clientelism in hiring, promotions, and assignments, and a division of spoils along party-political lines, or what was termed lottizzazione (Perotti 2008).

These practices, hardly unique to Italy, appear to be equally widespread in Russia, the Ukraine, and other former Soviet states (Osipian 2008, 2009), albeit in a slightly different form. However, to the best of my knowledge, endemic nepotism, family fiefdoms, and a sophisticated market in the sale of PhD dissertations are not problems that trouble New Zealand or its university system—although here, too, the politics of biculturalism and the growing emphasis on commercialization often result in university jobs being awarded in ways that are sometimes far from fair or transparent (Lewis and Shore 2017).

Combating Fraud in the University: An Antipodean Case Study

Rather than tackling the ontological question of “what is” university corruption or measuring whether it is increasing, I want to take a different angle by asking why universities have become so concerned with combating fraud and corruption and what lessons these anti-corruption initiatives offer for the anthropology of corruption. To address these questions, I draw on an ethnographic vignette from one of New Zealand’s leading universities.

One Wednesday morning, in June 2010, I opened my university mailbox to find a curious object sent to me—and to all staff—by what I assumed was the university’s human resources or communications office: a three-sided cardboard pyramid, each side displaying a message from the university senior leadership team about some recently launched initiative (fig. 1). On one side was a photograph of cigarette smoke curling sinuously from an ashtray against a black background, on top of which was written, in bold white capitals: “No Butts About It—Smoke Free Campuses.” This also announced, for those who wished to kick the habit, that help was available through the university’s “Quitline.” The second side, this time in softer, lowercase green lettering, was an announcement about the university’s new sustainability and environment policy and website:

Did You Know? In 2009, our university used 44% less energy and 73% less water per student than 30 years ago. Please help us keep improving.

• Turn off all unnecessary lights
• Report all leaks and dripping taps

It also encouraged staff to seek further information from the university’s sustainability and environment portal.4

The third side of the pyramid showed a man in a suit speaking into a mobile telephone, over which was written, in red and white, “FairCall” and “Let’s protect our University.” Full of imperatives and injunctions, this announced a new antifraud

3. “Rort” is a term common in Australia and New Zealand that means to engage in fraudulent and dishonest acts, or sharp practices, while remaining within the letter of the law.
and anti-corruption initiative, asserting that, “As staff of The University of Auckland we are committed to protecting the reputation of our university. If you suspect a staff member of defrauding the university, or of engaging in unethical behaviour, please make a good call. Contact KPMG FairCall on 0800 100 526. Our independent experts will provide you with support.”

Why had Auckland University launched this new antifraud hotline? What was the context behind this initiative? Had the university suddenly become more exposed to corruption? And why was the telephone hotline being directed by KPMG—an international accountancy firm not particularly recognized for its expertise in either anti-corruption or higher education? I decided to investigate.

Measuring Fraud or Market Making?

Tracking through the archives, I found a Radio New Zealand Newswire press release dated February 15, 2010, announcing that “the accounting firm KPMG says fraud in New Zealand has risen to record levels.” Fraud in New Zealand, it added, “amounted to 100-million dollars in 2009, with a dramatic surge in the second half of the year” (Thompson 2010). Further news reports in the Independent Financial Review and Fairfax Media highlighted more alarming figures:

Fraud soared in the second half of 2009, boosting the amount defrauded for the year to $100m, but the worst is yet to come, KPMG says. In the six months to December, $76m was defrauded compared with $22 in the first half of the year, according to KPMG’s large-scale fraud survey. . . . KPMG forensics partner Mark Leishman said the jump in the second half of last year was due to several multimillion dollar cases. Businesses had kept a closer eye on their books, meaning fraud was more likely to be detected. (Independent Financial Review 2010)

For a country that prides itself on its reputation for being one of the world’s least corrupt and most transparent countries, these figures are worrying. The only mitigating factor was that the high levels of fraud, most of which had been perpetrated against the government, financial institutions, and commercial businesses, had been uncovered during the 2008 global financial crisis and therefore reflected preexisting frauds. However, KPMG warned that “these figures confirm that fraud is a constant and serious threat to all sectors of the New Zealand economy, including business, governments, non-profit organisations, and individuals” (Scoop Media 2010). It also warned that the threat to organizations was as much internal as external. As the KPMG Fraud and Misconduct Survey 2010 put it, “Who did it and why? Sixty-five per cent of major frauds are committed by people already working in the victim organisation, who usually act alone” (KPMG 2010:3).

As if to corroborate this, the KPMG “Fraud Barometer,” released in July 2010, was headlined by Radio New Zealand National as “Fraud expected to rise to record level.” Yet according to KPMG forensic expert Stephen Bell, these figures were “only the tip of the iceberg” (McEntee 2010). The lobby...
group Business New Zealand (RNZ 2010) echoed the warning. To monitor these trends, KPMG began publishing the biannual Fraud Barometer, the findings of which are based on reported fraud cases brought before the criminal courts. These reports drew the same conclusions: fraud was a serious problem for both public and private sectors, the threat of fraud was growing, and the main perpetrators were individual employees—or as one report put it, “98 per cent by value were ‘inside jobs’” (KPMG 2010:3). The other key message is that most companies are complacent and do not spend enough on fraud and corruption prevention or detection.¹

The following year, KPMG’s fraud detection activities again made headline news: “KPMG says more fraudsters are being caught in New Zealand,” announced a Radio New Zealand bulletin, noting that KPMG’s 2011 Fraud Barometer had identified “20 high value fraud cases in the six months to December, almost a third more than in the first half of the year” (RNZ 2011). The 2012 Fraud Barometer reported an even more dramatic increase: financial crime had now reached a record $1.7 billion, $279.7 million of which arose directly from fraud, including four “super-frauds”—a term used for frauds greater than $3 million (KPMG 2012a). For KPMG, the lesson was obvious:

The message from experts, well supported by the results of this survey, is clear. To mitigate the risks of fraud, bribery and corruption, all New Zealand organisations need to plan for, implement and/or improve their prevention, detection and response strategies. Seen in this light, the opportunity to offer a dedicated analysis of the New Zealand experience is thus timely and important. (KPMG New Zealand 2012)

The same year, Deloitte (2012) commissioned its own Bribery and Corruption in Australia and New Zealand Survey, menacingly subtitled “A Storm on the Horizon.” And in 2014, PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PwC) published its global Economic Crime Report, subtitled “What you don’t know can hurt you,” which included a 32-page New Zealand supplement (PwC 2014). The Deloitte report was based on a survey of 390 respondents, most of whom are employees of Australian subsidiaries of foreign companies, public sector organizations, and financial organizations involved with compliance, risk, legal, and internal auditing. Like the KPMG report, it revealed a dramatic increase in fraud, warning of more to come and criticizing Australasian organizations for their complacency. To emphasise the point, it included a large boxed quote from Nick Peterson of the New Zealand Serious Fraud Office:

“It would be easy to sit back and say that New Zealand is the country perceived to have the least corruption, and that it only happens to others. However, we are seeing more instances of domestic corruption, such as bribes paid to public officials, and corrupt payments made within the private sector. Organisations need to be awake to the changing environment as well as the legal and reputational risks and consequences associated with engaging in corrupt practices. (Deloitte 2012:25)"

The Deloitte report’s recommendation was that organizations needed to conduct more regular bribery and risk assessments. Like the KPMG surveys, Deloitte also framed its report around metaphors of risk and protection, comparing fraud to a dangerous hurricane (as opposed to a treacherous iceberg), requiring urgent action to protect institutions (and “build resistance to flawed decision making”). And who better to do that work than professional risk-management accountants at Deloitte and KPMG?

These texts perfectly illustrate the performativity of corruption narratives and indicators: before these barometer surveys and audit reports, company leaders and university managers rarely considered fraud and corruption as urgent problems. Yet through these headline-grabbing findings and dire predictions, the problem is created for which these audit companies profess to be the solution. Anti-corruption has shifted from a movement to a lucrative industry (Sampson 2010), and the Big Four accountancy firms have been assiduous in cultivating the climate of risk and anxiety that has helped expand their business into new markets. Indeed, “anticorruptionism” has become integral to what Sampson (2016:83) terms “moral capitalism” and the growing emphasis companies now place on ethics and reputation as valuable company assets.

It is important to note the methodology behind the Deloitte survey. The survey “was completed by 390 respondents, including those from ASZ 200 and NZX 50 companies, Australian subsidiaries of foreign companies, public sector organisations and other listed and private companies. . . . The most common profile of respondent was a male employee within a senior financial position” (Deloitte 2012:2:2).² In short, these estimates of financial risk are derived primarily from the perceptions of those whose livelihoods are most closely entangled with risk and financial management.

Genealogy of the Whistle-Blower Hotline

How has this apparent surge in fraud impacted on New Zealand’s universities? The University of Auckland’s “FairCall” anti-corruption hotline was initiated in June 2010, 4 months after the KPMG report had discovered fraud to be a significant and growing economic problem for Australia and New Zealand. The report noted that the likelihood of fraud increases with the size of an organization, an important factor given that Auckland University employs over 5,000 people and has an

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¹. It should be noted that fraud is not corruption, technically speaking. Fraud typically entails false representation, deception, or concealment for personal pecuniary advantage. Where this develops into corruption is situations where officials or managers attempt to cover up, protect, or collude with a fraudster. I am grateful to Steven Sampson for highlighting these distinctions.

². ASZ 200 and NZX 50 are the main Australian and New Zealand stock market indexes, respectively.
operating budget of over $1 billion NZD, making it one of New Zealand’s largest organizations.

The whistle-blower hotline was in response to the Auditor General of New Zealand’s (2012) guidelines on measures for the prevention of fraud. It was also part of the university’s overall fraud-prevention program, overseen by the university council’s audit and risk committee. As an internal university website explains:

Hotlines such as the FairCall service are now a routine part of fraud prevention programmes in most large public and private organisations. They are one of the most common means by which fraud is detected, and often allow that detection to occur earlier than would be possible through routine checks and controls. Staff might not feel comfortable reporting their concerns to their immediate manager or a more senior manager but are able, through the hotline, to make an anonymous report to KPMG. (UoA 2014)

The rationale for using an external and private company to oversee this process was purportedly for reasons of confidentiality and trust: “The KPMG FairCall service provides all University staff with an independently monitored, external and anonymous service to report any concerns they may have about behaviour or conduct, which they think might be fraudulent, deceptive or unethical” (UoA 2014).

The university’s staff website notes that the FairCall hotline has generated about 10 calls per annum since its inception, “each of which has been investigated and a report provided to KPMG to then be shared with the caller” (UoA 2014). Fortunately, it concludes, investigations to date have not identified fraudulent activity at the university. However, this is immediately qualified with a warning that “in several instances, it has been noted that the University could implement better procedures and in others, better communication” (UoA 2014). It ends with advice to whistle-blowers about where to send their anonymous information and includes a postal address marked “KPMG Forensic, PO Box H67, Australia Square, Sydney.”

Interestingly, the university’s definition of corruption is far more expansive than that of the World Bank or Transparency International. As its Prevention of Fraud and Corruption Policy states:

The terms “fraud” and “corruption” are not restricted to monetary or material benefits. Fraud and corruption typically involve a deliberate, dishonest, deceptive and unauthorized act or omission causing loss or disadvantage to the University or resulting in a direct or indirect personal gain or advantage. Corruption is dishonest activity in which a manager, staff member or contractor of the University acts contrary to the interests of the University and abuses his/her position or trust in order to achieve some personal gain or advantage for him or herself of for another person or entity. (UoA 2010)

In short, anyone acting dishonestly and “contrary to the interests of the University” could be liable to accusations of corruption. As the document notes, under these terms, even the university itself could be accused of corrupt conduct. “We’ve been both relieved and pleased,” one senior leadership team member told me, “that we have not had misuse of the hotline with malicious calls” (personal communication, 2015). However, who constitutes “the University” or what “its” interests might be are not specified. Is the university its academics, professional staff, alumni, and students or its senate, library, and academic board? Is it a corporation sole or aggregate? Or is it embodied in the figures of its vice chancellor and senior leadership team? In New Zealand, these are issues of ongoing contestation between academics and management (Shore and Taitz 2012).

Paradoxically, the preoccupation with risk and reputation management may actually undermine the aims of the FairCall policy, as fears about proliferating risk create a climate of mistrust and bureaucratic closure. For example, in conducting research for this article, I contacted members of my university’s Tertiary Education Union (TEU) branch by email to ask whether any colleagues would like to share their experiences of using the whistle-blower hotline. The following morning, shortly after 9:00 a.m., 12 hours after sending my email, the university’s research ethics processes team leader (a role I had never heard of before) emailed to inform me that “a staff member forwarded your email to the Chair of University’s Human Participant Ethics Committee (UAHPEC) to ask whether my research had UAHPEC approval.” I was politely informed that formal ethics approval was required if I wished to solicit information of this kind. Obtaining UAHPEC approval is an arduous process that typically involves completing a 30-to-40-page application form plus numerous appendices (including participant information sheet, consent forms, and sample questions) and usually requires several attempts—and many months—before approval is granted. Many of my colleagues saw this as a crude attempt to shut down my research. One colleague even telephoned me that evening and warned that I should issue a retraction; otherwise, I risked laying myself open to disciplinary action. “They can be pretty vicious if they want to,” he added, drawing on previous experience. I therefore sent another email to the TEU mailing list asking colleagues to ignore my previous email because I did not have UAHPEC permission to conduct this enquiry. That second email elicited many more responses, including several offers from colleagues to speak off the record about their experiences of fraud, corruption, nepotism, and bullying. One of the reviewers for this article suggested that I make this incident the central theme of this article. As they summed up the story, “Academics whose skill set it is to interview and ferret find it very difficult to do so, even on their own turf. This tells us a lot about why transparency for most of us, no matter what our subject position, is an illusion. Corporate entities in the age of neoliberalism generate, as a matter of routine, opacity.”

Such opacity combined with mistrust leads precisely to the conspiratorial mind-sets that are integral to the corruption/anti-corruption complex that Muir and Gupta (2018) outline in the introduction to this special issue of Current Anthro-
pology. However, while these themes of organizational transparency and trust feature prominently in debates about audit culture and academia (Strathern 2000), my story has a different analytical intent: to understand what drives these preoccupations with combating corruption. To my surprise, one of the university’s senior leadership team came to my aid by putting me in contact with the university’s Performance and Risk Coordination Office and KPMG Australia. I therefore interviewed several Australian and New Zealand forensic accountants and risk management officials. What I discovered was that most whistle-blower calls were not about accounting irregularities or misappropriation of funds; rather, they concerned bullying and harassment of staff and students (see KPMG Australia 2016b). One could interpret this as evidence of the decline in university collegiality, or as evidence that people are now more likely to report workplace bullying, or perhaps both.

Why This Heightened Concern with Corruption? Why Now? What Has Changed?

A key claim KPMG and Deloitte make is that New Zealand has been complacent about fraud protection. Historically, bribery and corruption were not high on the agenda for Australian and New Zealand organizations. What has changed, however, is the international and institutional context. As Deloitte’s report notes (2012:1), Australian and New Zealand organizations have become increasingly exposed to risks of fraud and bribery as they look overseas for new business and growth opportunities. The environment of austerity and economic volatility created by the 2008 financial crisis is another factor. As New Zealand’s Auditor General (2012:9) acknowledges, “risk of fraud increases when many people struggle to make ends meet. Experience internationally generally confirms a greater incidence of fraud in recessionary economic climates, with fraud increasing because of ‘need’ rather than greed.” As I illustrate below, this is a very different explanation for the causes of fraud than that given in the KPMG and Deloitte reports.

Other contextualizing factors include more stringent application of anti-bribery and corruption legislation, such as the UK Bribery Act (2010) and the growing enforcement impact internationally of the US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, the UN Convention Against Corruption (2005), the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (2003), and the OECD Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions (revised in 2009). It also includes the more recently established International Standards Organization antibribery standard, established by Australia. Both Australia’s Federal Police and New Zealand’s Serious Fraud Office have increased their enforcement of anti-corruption legislation, partly in response to the US “war on terror” and to fears about trafficking and money laundering for purposes of terrorism.

However, neither KPMG, nor Deloitte, nor PwC draws any links between increasing corruption and the policies and practices associated with the spread of audit culture and neoliberalization. By contrast, critical accountants and economists argue that taking high risks and malpractice in pursuit of profits in the financial sector are a direct consequence of the “neoliberalist faith in competition, free markets, quest for private gain and light-touch regulation” (Sikka 2015:3; Stiglitz 2010). Instead, these firms insist that individual greed, opportunity, and lack of internal controls are what drive rising levels of corruption. KPMG Australia has even produced a profile of the types of people who commit fraud. The “typical fraudster,” it asserts, “is between 36 and 55,” “predominantly male,” holds an “executive or director-level position,” is “autocratic” yet “well-respected in their organization” and “likely to be regarded as friendly,” and is “motivated by personal gain” and the sense of “because I can” (KPMG 2016a; see also PwC 2014a). While their data can, no doubt, corroborate these claims, the emphasis on individual and psychological factors masks the wider structural and systemic issues. In the case of universities, the increasing exposure to risk is itself often a result of the financialization of higher education and increased levels of indebtedness as universities borrow to fund new building programs. As Transparency International (2013a) notes, increasing university fraud is closely linked to decreasing government investment:

As the global economic crisis heated up over the past few years, public money for education declined in many countries, causing some colleges and universities increasingly to depend on the generosity of private donors. . . . The very structure and culture of colleges and universities, as well as the current constraints under which many . . . operate, can create conditions that facilitate fraud. (Transparency International 2013a:114)

That said, the massive corruption found in many Eastern European state-funded universities (Osipian 2009) makes it hard to sustain the argument that privatization alone is the source of increased corruption. Transparency International also highlights the prevalence of admissions fraud in the former Soviet states. Ukrainian university administrators have become “inventive in circumventing new admissions rules in order to grant admission to their protégés,” it claims, while in Russia, “paid impersonators of students have been arrested in testing centres” (Parr 2013). There is, however, another aspect of this link between decreasing public investment, increasing private involvement, risk management, and corruption that is worth pursuing further: the role of the audit companies themselves.

KPMG and Deloitte: Warriors of Integrity or Agents of Corruption?

David Whyte (2015) suggests that one reason for the recent explosion of high-profile corruption scandals in the United as well as distorting market forces and paving the way for organised crime and terrorism.”
Kingdom—involving some of what were previously the country’s most trusted institutions, like the National Health Service, the police, and Parliament—is because the watchdogs that are supposed to guard against corruption have been fatally weakened by “the slow and pernicious onward march of a neoliberal political economy” (Whyte 2015:5; see also Sikka 2014). The same international institutions that demand the removal of protective economic policies to encourage privatization and “market reform,” he notes, often drive anti-corruption policies. Indeed, Peter Eigen, one of the founders of Transparency International, previously worked for the World Bank, and Transparency International maintains a close relationship with the bank today.

The Big Four international accountancy firms often portray themselves as professionals dedicated to probity and honesty, “integrity warriors” engaged in the global fight against fraud and corruption (Sampson 2005:105). But they also have a vested interest in promoting the market in the anti-corruption services that they provide. These firms, as Sikka (2015:157) observes, were “key players in establishing the post-1970s hegemony and major beneficiaries of the financialization of the economy. They have become adept at bending the rules to advance their economic interests.” In short, these companies are part of the problem for which they claim to be the solution.

Between them, the Big Four employ over 750,000 staff, operate across 150 countries, and, in 2014 alone, generated a massive $113.7 billion in revenues (Doherty 2014). These firms dominate the market in company auditing, yet what is striking today is that their fastest-growing divisions are currently in services other than auditing. Indeed, nonaudit work now accounts for over 60% of the Big Four’s total global revenues. This involves a raft of legal, financial, and management services that include risk assessment, ethics and compliance, business consulting, planning, tax advice, superannuation, insurance, and even climate change and sustainability (KPMG 2016). As a result, one part of these firms might be auditing a company’s books while another part provides the same client with tax avoidance advice that may include lucrative tax shelters in unregulated tax havens such as Panama, Luxembourg, or the Caribbean Islands. Ernst and Young and KPMG (but not Deloitte) responded by disposing of their consulting arms. However, by the mid-2000s, as Agnew (2015) notes, “these agreements had expired, paving the way for the firms to rebuild in consulting—under the guise of ‘advisory’ work—through a series of acquisitions.”

As a result of these acquisitions and growth, the Big Four have pioneered a new hybrid form of business entity that is neither a multinational corporation nor a global partnership, nor even a single firm. Their role, instead, is to act as “coordinating entities” for their network of global affiliates that are unified around a brand and that adhere to shared values and ethics and a common code of conduct (Ernst and Young 2013; KPMG 2012b). This new business model was designed to make the firms more flexible and responsive to their globalizing clients and better equipped to capture new markets. However, it has also made them more vulnerable to conflicts of interest, dangerous risk taking, and fraud, as evidenced in the extraordinary number of scandals involving Big Four auditors in cases of fraud, false accounting, manipulation of share value, and tax evasion. Hence, Sikka (2015:158) notes that “an internal report by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) in 2005 concluded that the Big Four accounting firms were behind almost half of all known avoidance schemes.” Little seems to have changed since then, and as the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2015:3) noted in a recent report, the mass marketing of complex and aggressive tax avoidance schemes by these firms constitutes “the promotion of tax avoidance on an industrial scale.”

For example, KPMG failed to warn directors of the Canadian company Hollinger about violations of fiduciary standards that investigators described as “corporate kleptocracy.” Between 1997 and 2003, Lord Conrad Black, its founder, managed to syphon off a staggering $400 million before he was detected. This was more than 95% of Hollinger’s adjusted net income (Coffee 2005:207). In Australia, KPMG and Deloitte were both sued by the Northern Territories Supreme Court for undisclosed millions for failing to detect the theft of millions of dollars by trustees of an Australian Aboriginal land trust whose accounts they audited (Wild 2014). And in the United States, a Senate subcommittee found that KPMG, PwC, and Earnst and Young had all sold fraudulent and illegal tax shelters to help wealthy clients avoid $2.5 billion in taxes. KPMG admitted “criminal wrongdoing” to the Department of Justice and was fined $456 million. However, the proceedings revealed that a senior KPMG professional had urged the firm to ignore internal revenue service rules on registering tax shelters. “He coldly calculated that the penalties for violating the law would be no greater than $14,000 per $100,000 in fees that KPMG would collect. ‘For example’, he wrote, ‘our average . . . deal would result in KPMG fees of $360,000 with a maximum penalty exposure of only $31,000’” (Hudson, Chavkin, and Mos 2014).

Such scandals have not dented KPMG’s confidence in its own ethical probity and in the high standards of ethical conduct that it claims to require from its staff, as stated in its Global Code of Conduct (KPMG 2012b). Yet far from being anomalous, such calculations are central to the instrumental rationality of audit culture and the collusion that it produces. In some respects, this echoes Muir’s observation about the moral ambiguity that surrounds corruption in Argentina; “people disavowed corruption in the same breath as they voiced their complicity with it” (Muir 2016:132). The growing entanglement of the Big Four in the business of universities creates new kinds of risk and complicity, and the evident conflicts of interest do not seem to deter university managers from seeking these firms’ services in fraud prevention and anti-corruption.

Conclusions: Performativity of Fraud and Anti-corruption

These stories highlight both the financial logics and conflicts of interest at play in the activities of the Big Four accountancy
firms. They also show how these firms collude in the risk and corruption that they claim to ameliorate, a process that illustrates the market-making potential of anti-corruption discourses: audit firms produce reports highlighting the dangers of fraud, for which they profess to offer the solution—to their fee-paying clients. As Sampson (2010) argues, this “anti-corruption industry” is both a growing transnational business and a “world” in the anthropological sense (Sampson 2005:110). It also reflects what Wedel (2009:51) terms the “dirty togetherness” of collusion and collusion between individuals and corporate networks that operate in the gray zones and revolving doors between the private and public spheres. Universities should therefore be wary of contracting these commercial audit firms to run their services. This is not to trivialize the problem of corruption in universities or elsewhere but rather to interrogate the discourse of risk management, with its metaphors of icebergs and storms on the horizon, and ask whether these large accountancy firms are sufficiently independent to provide the necessary watchdog and guardian function to protect organizations against fraud and corruption. As the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2015:6) concluded, the tax industry “has demonstrated very clearly that it cannot be trusted to regulate itself.”

The stories also highlight two other points of wider relevance to debates about corruption and its remedy. The first concerns issues of ethics and morality. Expert opinion holds that corruption and fraud prevention are cultural and behavioral issues rather than systemic problems. As the UNESCO report concluded, the solution to fraud and corruption lies in enhancing “ethical education,” “maintaining transparent regulatory systems,” and “strengthening management capacities for greater accountability”—all of which will help to build a “virtuous triangle” (Hallack and Poisson 2007:21). However, in the case of KPMG US, corporate fraud and assisting clients with tax avoidance was not so much about morality as it was a simple business calculation (which, one could argue, is simply a different kind of economic morality). The issue for KPMG was not about ethics but about how much they could get away with without being caught and a calculation of the costs of being fined.

The second point concerns theories about the causes of corruption. The commonsense argument is that the root of corruption is individual avarice. As Colin Ferguson (2012:47) states, “simple greed and the opportunity to live beyond one’s normal lifestyle are the primary motivations for fraud.” This is sometimes framed as “good people doing bad things,” an argument that lends support to calls for better training and guidance, which KPMG or Deloitte will provide. The examples in this paper tell a different story. They show that fraud and corruption are largely systemic and structural problems and that these have increased with the growing financialization and auditing of higher education. Strengthening management and subjecting universities to numerical performance targets and ever-greater scrutiny and interventions by external assessors and auditors does not foster greater transparency or more ethical behavior. Indeed, these may produce the opposite effect by creating opacity, incentivizing more risky behavior, undermining collegiality, and promoting a regress of mistrust.

Substituting (or “supplementing”) professional trust and collegiality with systems of audit is typically seen as a more rigorous and effective way to prevent corruption and promote ethical probity. This view is epitomized by New Zealand’s Controller and Auditor General, Lyn Provost: “It is also important to remember that trusting staff is not a fraud control. Systems do not commit fraud, people do. Public entities need to ensure that they have the right systems in place” (Auditor General of New Zealand 2012:3).

This statement recalls the argument, often used by the US National Rifle Association, that “guns don’t kill people, people kill people.” The flaw in this reasoning is that it is systems that create the conditions of possibility and incentives for corruption. By blurring the distinction between public and private and encouraging the increasing incursion of private wealth accumulation into the public sphere, private audit companies actively collude in the neoliberal makeover of universities. Moreover, substituting professional judgment with auditing technologies tends to have a corrosive effect on relations of trust, particularly in the public sector, as O’Neill (2002) has argued. This kind of approach unwittingly destroys the very idea of the university itself as a place of disinterested scholarship and teaching, which has traditionally always relied on ideas of collegiality, professionalism, and trust.

This invites the question, why did Auckland University’s Audit and Finance Committee contract out the administration of its fraud prevention program to KPMG Australia rather than deal with it in-house or with professionals who were not tied to the management and accounting industry—such as Transparency International’s long-standing Advocacy and Legal Advice Centres? Might it have had something to do with the composition of that committee, the fact that the chairman of the university’s council was an accountant, or that the university’s internal control environment is regularly audited by its internal auditors, PwC? At least the contract was not outsourced to PwC, which might have been considered inappropriate. According to one informant, “the university went out to a limited tender, and KPMG was selected from amongst the various proposals.” Coincidentally, one of the council members had been a partner for KPMG for 30 years and chair and chief executive of KPMG New Zealand from 2008 to 2011.

This brings us back to the anthropological point I began with about the wider definition and meaning of corruption and the way that privatization and the growing influence of commercial interests are changing (and corrupting) the meaning and mission of the university. Paradoxically, the institutionalization of antifraud programs is fuelling that process.

8. Transparency International’s Advocacy and Legal Advice Centres have been providing free and confidential legal advice to witnesses and victims of corruption since 2003 (Transparency International 2016).
Finally, it is important to note that no definition of fraud actually exists in the criminal code in Australia. The Australian Fraud and Corruption Control standard defines fraud as:

dishonest activity causing actual or potential financial loss to any person or entity including theft of money or other property by employees or persons external to the entity and whether or not deception is used at the time. . . . This also includes deliberate falsification, concealment, destruction or use of falsified document used or intended for use for a normal business purpose or the improper use of information or position.9 (Ferguson 2012:48)

This is an extraordinarily broad definition and one that could also encompass activities and behaviors routinely performed by university vice-chancellors and senior management teams, particularly in their dealings with academics or negotiations with staff unions. Indeed, tertiary education union members regularly spoke about management’s tactical use of concealment, falsification of the facts, and improper use of information during the industrial disputes between 2010 and 2013 (Shore and Davidson 2014).

The issue of corruption in the university is therefore perhaps less problematic than the corruption of the university, particularly as this relates to the increasing capture of its assets by predatory financial interests and for-profit companies. Rosigno’s polemic about university bureaucracy as organized crime may, in fact, be quite prescient: the harm to universities as a result of increasing extraction of income from parents and students, the endless reforms to transform universities into simulacra of the transnational business corporation, and the continuous administrative and managerial bloat certainly provide a broader perspective for thinking about the anthropology of corruption. If corruption is a “category of transgression,” as Muir and Gupta (2018) note, then what we need are new concepts and methods to better understand what transgression means in a university and academic context. We used to think of corruption as the abuse of office or use of power for personal private gain, but the blurring of the boundaries between the public and private sectors and the revolving door between finance, accountancy, and the governing boards of public organizations has elided the distinction that once isolated the public sector from the predatory interests and logics of finance capitalism. I have singled out the role of the Big Four in this boundary-eroding work, but they are not alone. Audit culture and the corruption potential it generates are part of a much larger complex of lean and mean organizations, the tasks that they are required to perform, the pressures that they are under, and the way they are managed.

Not even the Big Four are safe from audit culture and its rationale. After all, it was not so long ago that the Big Four were the Big Eight, then the Big Five. And the king of them all, Arthur Anderson, fell from grace in a way that no one, least of all the big accounting firms, expected.

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9. New Zealand’s Serious Fraud Office (2015) similarly defines fraud as “dishonest activity causing actual or potential financial loss to any person or entity, including theft of money or other property, by employees or persons external to the entity; and where deception is used at the time, immediately before or immediately following the activity.”


Corruption, Right On!
Hidden Cameras, Cynical Satire, and Banal Intimacies of Anti-corruption
by Smoki Musaraj

Since 2002, the satirical investigative television show Fiks Fare (“Right On!” or “Exactly”); pronounced “feeks far-eh” has aired immediately after prime-time news at a leading national broadcasting network in Albania. Through sting operations and cynical satire, the show tells the raw story of everyday experiences of corruption in Albanian society—from daily interactions with low-level public administration officers to the backroom deals of high-level officials. Over the years, Fiks Fare has endured as an effective whistle-blower in a country notorious for a lack of prosecutions and convictions on corruption charges. In this article, I explore the effects of this unlikely anti-corruption agent by drawing attention to its narratives of corruption, its technologies of investigation, and its genres of representation. I argue that, through its use of sting operations and mass mediation, the show constructs specific publics and subjects—victims, intermediaries, perpetrators—that engage in everyday corruption. Second, through its use of a genre of cynical satire and vulgar aesthetics, the show constructs a political commentary that makes visible the intimacies of corruption and the normalized complicity of ordinary people with figures of power. This genre speaks more broadly to forms of governance and of the state in a postsocialist context. I suggest that Fiks Fare remains effective over the years precisely because of the form of its critique of power, articulated not through opposition or resistance but rather through ambiguity, vulgarity, and complicity.

Every night after the prime-time news, a rambunctious animation announces the beginning of the satirical investigative show Fiks Fare (“Right On!” or “Exactly”); pronounced “feeks far-eh”). Airing since 2002 on Top Channel, Fiks Fare (commonly referred to as Fiksi; pronounced “feeks”) is considered “an institution” (Qosja 2016) and a “cult” television program (Tema Online 2012). It is the first and longest running investigative journalism show in postsocialist and post-Ponzi Albania. Cast in a style of parody and cheap entertainment, the show tells the raw story of everyday experiences of corruption in Albanian society—from daily interactions with low-level public administration officers to the backroom deals of high-level officials. Fiksi makes visible this praxis of everyday corruption through visual media, cynical satire, and vulgar aesthetics (think Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, The Daily Show, The Onion, and Charlie Hebdo combined). For many years, the show’s set was designed to resemble a pirate ship where two show hosts (often dressed as pirates) introduced various investigations and discussed current political events while two dancers (veline) punctuated the transitions between segments. The substance of the show consists of low-tech video footage obtained from sting operations, interviews, and citizen-led investigations conducted in government offices, cafés, street corners, and even private homes. Gritty images and muffled conversations construct a visual narrative for accounts of corruption that permeate informal rumors and conversations. Over the years, the show has received numerous awards, including second place in 2015 for the prestigious European Union (EU) award for investigative journalism in the Western Balkans and Turkey.

Fiksi enjoys widespread popularity and trust among ordinary Albanians. Fiksi’s emergence in 2002 was contemporaneous with the “anti-corruption industry” (Sampson 2010) that took shape at the end of the Cold War. This movement includes global consultants, research centers, agencies, civil society groups, and various techniques of knowing and governing corruption, such as indicators, media investigations, independent whistle-blowers, and the justice system. This global movement has shaped local anti-corruption initiatives in Albania as well.

Indeed, since the early 2000s, corruption has been at the center of Albania’s national political agenda (Kajsiu 2013, 2016). Anti-corruption campaigns have been a prime target of international monitoring and funding (see also Sampson 2005, 2010), with corruption perception surveys and indicators re-

1. Albania transitioned to a multiparty democracy and a free-market economy in 1991. In 1997, the country fell into anarchy and near civil war after the collapse of a dozen Ponzi schemes that had attracted a large number of the population.
2. The piracy theme dominated the stage design and opening credits of the show in the first decade of its broadcasting. The set has since been changed into a sleek urban setting with the skyline of the capital, Tirana.
become a battleground for the into their mandates (Kajsiu 2013). The courts have likewise to face the same accusations of high-level corruption months 2005 election and the Socialist Party in the 2013 election), only of the spectrum have made anti-corruption reforms a prime brought to justice.

justice system, including the passing of an EU-mandated ju- despite concerted efforts to enact institutional reform in the system, including the passing of an EU-mandated judicial reform package in 2016, no high-level officials have been brought to justice. 

Unlike these top-down initiatives, Fiksi takes an intimate approach to corruption; the show has been most effective at bringing actual acts of corruption literally to the dinner table. Through its methods of investigation—sting operations and volunteer confessions—Fiksi makes visible acts of corruption discussed in rumors, public polls, and political debate. The cases exposed by Fiksi cover a wide spectrum of types of corruption—from instances of petty corruption (bribes in courts, health facilities, and public administration offices) to those of state capture (such as deals over public procurement contracts). Furthermore, Fiksi’s revelations have led to actual police inves- tigations and lawsuits. At the same time, Fiksi has also been subject to critique for its own breaches of journalistic ethics, raising questions about the kind of justice that can be achieved by a show driven by commercial interests and by a lack of re- spect for the rights of privacy and due process (Vehbiu 2009a, 2009b, 2010).

In this article, I draw attention to the show’s unique narra- tives of corruption. Working with insights from anthropologists of corruption in public culture (Gupta 2012; Lomnitz 1995; Muir 2016), I show how Fiksi constitutes particular publics and subjects that engage in everyday corrupt transactions in con- temporary Albania. More specifically, I note how the show constructs victims, perpetrators, and mediators of corruption. Furthermore, I draw attention to the show’s signature gen- res of representation: a combination of cynical satire, vulgar aesthetics, and banal intimacies centering on a specific form of masculinity. This genre of representation is deployed as a strat- egy of “overidentification” with (Yurchak 2006) and “hyper- normalization” of (Boyer and Yurchak 2010) official discourses of power. As such, the show serves as a commentary on the postsocialist forms of governance and the state. I argue that Fiksi becomes an effective anti-corruption agent precisely because it reproduces the official ambiguities around right and wrong, victim and perpetrator, and crime and justice.

My reflections on representations and performativity of power and the state in Albania in and through Fiksi also speak to broader discussions of the state in postdevelopment and postcol- onial contexts. As a postsocialist Eastern European country that continues to strive to join the EU, Albania is highly de- pendent, politically and economically, on international and regional governing structures. Over the past two and a half de- cades, the country has embraced market and institutional re- form to conform to International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and EU conditionalities. The predominant form of government- tality (Foucault 1991) thus exemplifies the kind of “transna- tional apparatus of governmentality” (Ferguson and Gupta 2002:994) prevalent in other postdevelopment and postcol- onial contexts. As in these other contexts, this form of govern- ance produces both a push toward privatization reforms and a lack of power and accountability of elected officials. This, in turn, has enabled pervasive clientelism, blackmail, and scan- dal, which, in Albania, rarely lead to action by justice authori- ties. Through its undercover recordings, Fiksi exposes and performs these aspects of state power. In the following, I take up some of Fiksi’s key investigations to examine the show’s commentary on corruption and the state in postsocialist Al- bania.

I begin with a discussion of the broader anthropology of corruption and the specific global and local anti-corruption movements and discourses proliferating in Albania since the mid-1990s. I then turn to specific investigations by Fiksi, high- lighting key themes and publics that the show constructs through its forms of investigation and its genre of represen- tation. I chose the specific cases to discuss on the basis of cues from people on the ground who made reference to Fiksi’s epi- sodes as a way of talking about their own experiences with corruption. I focus more specifically on episodes aired between 2005 and 2013, a time when the main cohosts were Saimiri (Saimir Kodra) and “Doktori” (the doctor, a nickname for Genti Pjetri). Finally, I discuss Fiksi’s particular style of representa- tion and aesthetics of vulgarity and complicity in acts of cor-ruption, noting the role that this aesthetic plays in legitimizing Fiksi’s findings while also reproducing the forms of clientelism and blackmail that the show itself seeks to expose.

3. The two most renowned of these indicators were Transparency International’s “Corruption Perception Index” and the US Agency for International Development/Institute for Development Research and Alter- natives (IDRA) “Corruption: Perceptions and Experiences” (see Kajsiu 2013, 2016; Musaraj 2008, 2015).

4. The judicial system (courts, prosecutor’s office, and judges) ranks as one of the most corrupt institutions; e.g., in the most recent IDRA survey on “Corruption in Albania: Perceptions and Experience,” judges and pros- ecutors rank as some of the most corrupt officials, second only to customs officers (IDRA 2016:7). A recent investigation by two renowned journalists notes that most recent prosecutions of corruption target low-level officials and/or assign short sentences for crimes that, by law, should carry the highest sentences (Çela and Erebura 2016).

5. Michel Foucault defined governmentality as the process by which a population is governed via state and nonstate institutions, discourses, practices, and modes of self-regulation (Foucault 1991).

6. Saimiri left the show to join another network. Saimiri has recently launched the investigative show Stop, airing at Top Channel’s rival, TV Klan. Stop also replicates Fiksi’s formula. Since 2016, two new co-hosts (Devis Muka and Dorian Ramalii) have joined Fiksi.
Discourses, Technologies, and Aesthetics of Corruption and Anti-corruption

Researchers of corruption and anti-corruption have noted the difficulties and ambiguities of defining and measuring the former and of assessing the latter. Political scientists and legal scholars typically define corruption as abuse of public office for private gain (Heidenheimer 2005). This definition, alas, leaves unquestioned the broader political, economic, and cultural context within which corruption is identified, defined, and targeted (see also Haller and Shore 2015). As James Scott (1969) noted early on, for some, corruption represents the appropriation of public goods, but for others, corruption could be seen as a redistribution of resources (see also Bocarejo 2018; Hetherington 2018; Roitman 2004). Some definitions of corruption focus on the breach of the law; yet others have pointed out that some of the most serious forms of corruption take the form of “legal corruption” (Kauffman and Vicente 2005) or “state capture” (Hellman, Jones, and Kaufmann 2000). Indeed, these latter forms of corruption are both most costly to the general public and hardest to prosecute, as they often take place through legal avenues.

Early works on the anthropology of corruption (many by authors represented in this issue of Current Anthropology) looked into the shifting definitions (political, social, cultural, and economic) of corruption and, most importantly, the political and socioeconomic context of acts and accusations of corruptions (among others, see Haller and Shore 2005; Schneider and Schneider 2005; Scott 1969; Smith 2007). A number of these works emphasize the ambivalent politics, ethics, and economics of corruption (Bardhan 1997; Scott 1969). Others stress the importance of the historical context and of the cultural repertoires that shape the dynamics of local political actors (Schneider and Schneider 2005) and of political practices and rituals (Lomnitz 1995). Recent contributions in the anthropology of corruption look to the production and circulations of narratives and discourses of corruption in public culture. These studies approach stories and narratives of corruption—circulating in everyday conversation, in gossip and rumor, in national and local media—as key sites of the construction of the state and/or the political arena (Gupta 1995, 2012; Lomnitz 1995; Tidey 2018) and as generative of particular publics and/or subjects (Gupta 2012; Hasty 2006; Mbembe and Roitman 1995; Muir 2016).

Informed by the broader anthropology of media and public culture, I focus on the form and content of Fiksi with an eye to “the analytical and ideological work” (Gupta 2012:114) performed by the show’s mass-mediated narratives of corruption. One crucial element of the show is its style of presentation. Fiksi is fully sponsored by the national television channel, Top Channel.7 The show is a rip-off of the Italian show Striscia La Notizia (“The News is Creeping”), also a popular investigative satirical program, which airs on one of Silvio Berlusconi’s Mediasete channels.8 The show’s structure and the overall theme of cynical and vulgar humor mimic Striscia’s format and style. At the same time, Fiksi captures a unique vernacular. The dialogue in the show reflects both a late-Communist satirical genre akin to the Soviet stiob (Yurchak 2006:249–254) and a post-socialist genre of cynical political humor that resonates with similar media formats in late-liberal (Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Molč 2013) and postcolonial (Mbembe 2001) contexts. To better appreciate the uniqueness of Fiksi, I begin by locating the show within a broader field of global and local anti-corruption agents and movements.

Corruption Discourses and Anti-corruption Agents since the Late 1990s

Corruption emerged as a target of state and global policymakers in the 1960s, as part of the broader movements of democratization and modernization that dominated postcolonial state formations in the Global South. Corruption—as a manifestation of bourgeois practices—was also an object of concern during this same time period across the former socialist world (Kipnis 2008). Having waned in significance in the 1980s, corruption reemerged as a target of global development agencies at the end of the Cold War. By the mid-1990s, the apocalyptic warnings of the “corruption eruption” (Naim 1995) and the “cancer of corruption” (Wolfensohn 2005) set the stage for the proliferation of an “anti-corruption industry” (Sampson 2010) consisting of corruption indicators and anti-corruption policies, measures, and funding. This movement targets corruption as an obstacle to free enterprise. It builds on an ideology of economic governance that advocates shrinking the public sector through privatization reforms as a means of creating more efficient markets. In the late 1990s, transnational nongovernmental organizations such as Transparency International reshaped the global discourse of corruption by reifying survey methods and composite indicators as preferred technologies for measuring and governing corruption.9

7. Top Channel is one of the top three private broadcasting stations in post-socialist Albania. It is part of the Top Media network and Digitalb platform. In its business model and programs, Top Channel seeks to emulate the Italian network Mediasete, owned by Berlusconi. But unlike the head of Mediasete, the head of Top Channel did not hold any political office, and the network has become increasingly close to the Socialist Party (Mediawet, by contrast, leans center-right).

8. Since the proliferation of private television networks in the late 1990s, replicating the formulas of Mediasete programs is a common practice among Albanian producers. These acts of mimicry also trace back to a historical relationship of longing for Italian television during the time of late socialism, when consuming Western media, culture, and information was highly politicized, officially banned, but unofficially fetishized (see also Carelli 2014; Musaraj 2012; Tochka 2014).

9. A number of interdisciplinary efforts by social scientists, legal scholars, and practitioners have recently provided a critical perspective on the dominance of indicators in assessments of corruption and governance. Among others, see Mallo 2014; Mallo, Umbach, and Bhuta 2018; Merry 2011; Merry, Davis, and Kingsbury 2015; Rottenburg et al. 2015.
Over the past two decades, corruption indicators have become important factors in determining financial aid for countries in the Global South as well as in evaluating political membership in key geopolitical communities, such as the EU. In the Albanian case, I was told in 2008 by a local professional involved in the anti-corruption industry that the country’s corruption “grade” has become an important factor in a wide range of agreements—from negotiations over International Monetary Fund loans to those over EU accession. Still, these corruption indicators and their grades only gain or lose strength as they circulate among local political elites and policymakers (see, e.g., Musaraj 2015; Serban 2015).

Recent years have also seen the emergence of other grassroots anti-corruption agents, technologies, and tactics. In the past decade, corruption has been a target of popular dissent and revolution in a number of autocratic regimes—from the orange revolution in Ukraine to the social movements of the Arab Spring. These movements have made use of various technologies of mass mediation (such as the use of social media in the Arab Spring) as a means of denouncing government corruption. Independent actors also have used media forms as technologies of transparency; among others, these include global scandals (such as Julian Assange’s WikiLeaks or the Panama Papers) as well as local mavricks (such as the sting operations by Tehelka in India or the investigative show Striscia la Notizia in Italy). Fiksi exemplifies this latter group of anti-corruption agents.

Fiksi seeks to make visible the “polysemous and diffuse” (Haller and Shore 2005:9) phenomenon of corruption through the use of surreptitious video footage of private conversations and transactions deemed illegal and/or illegitimate. In so doing, Fiksi presents a quasi-ethnographic account of corruption in a language and style that is remarkably different from the bureaucratic-rational language of global indicators, the rights’ discourse of social movements, and the freedom of information discourse of journalists.

Televising Everyday Corruption

Before deciding to do research on Fiksi, I watched it as pure entertainment, as a caricature of “real politics” in the short visits that I made regularly to the country while I was an international student in Canada and the United States. I grew up in Tirana, Albania, in the late-Communist period; I came of age during the tumultuous times of the postsocialist transition and experienced the early 1990s as a time filled with hope and excitement as well as utter confusion and disarray. One of the most noticeable changes of the 1990s was the explosion of sexually explicit language in public spaces and in vernacular discourse. The Communist official discourse—in written, oral, and visual culture—was particularly formalist, puritan, and chaste. Before the 1990s, any acts of intimacy or sexuality (even romantic kisses) were edited out of any form of cultural production—in books, in foreign films, and in public spaces. By contrast, one of the first signs of change in the landscape of Tirana in the late 1980s and early 1990s were graffiti spelling out body parts and sexual acts. Vernacular discourse and public spaces in general became more sexualized. This change took different forms. For one thing, the display of romantic affection in public was now condoned (if not encouraged). At the same time, sexual harassment in public spaces became a norm. I experienced this latter change very vividly as I, like many of my female peers, quickly learned the art of ignoring catcalls and dodging potential harassers when walking in the city. But overall, conversation among peers about once-forbidden topics of romance and sexuality became more lax; such conversations also imparted a style of cynicism initially directed toward the morality of the Communist official discourse. By the late 1990s, following the boom and bust of the infamous Ponzi schemes, however, this cynicism intensified as the initial enthusiasm of free-market reform began to chill, confronted by the reality of economic crisis and political authoritarianism. This cynicism also fueled the desire for going abroad (jashtë shtetit).

Like many of my peers, I left Albania to pursue education abroad, first in Canada then in the United States, in the hope that I would eventually find work opportunities there that were not available to me in Albania. I remained, nonetheless, plugged in to postsocialist cynicism as I returned to Albania every summer. During these visits, I quickly reembodied my cynical self and continued to pick up new phrases or jokes from friends and family living in Albania. When Fiksi started to air in 2002, it made a big impression on me, because it was the first program to capture on television the vernacular genre of discourse—filled with cynical satire, sexually explicit language, and a sense of fatalism—that I had witnessed becoming the norm in everyday conversation. In its overidentification with this postsocialist vernacular discourse, Fiksi took off the edge from the experience of humiliation, uncertainty, and utter powerlessness that I personally felt while performing the annual rituals of waiting in long lines at the gardens and hallways of foreign embassies and government offices. Fiksi’s humor seemed to subvert and ridicule the structures of power and sense of powerlessness experienced in bureaucratic offices, both national and international.

When I began my research on discourses of corruption in Albania in 2008–2009, I became aware that people chose to watch Fiksi not just as catharsis but also as a prime source of information. Various interlocutors referenced Fiksi as a reli-

11. On Tehelka, see Mazzarella 2006; on Striscia la Notizia, see Molé 2013.
12. While the economic and political transformations of this time have been documented at length by a number of authors, the specific changes in vernacular discourse and in changing norms and ethics have received less attention.
able source of evidence and information on issues pertaining to corruption. One resident of Vlora, for instance, praised Fiksi for having uncovered the corruption of the police in his city. Vlora is a second-tier city located on the coast that has a reputation for being a center of trafficking and other illegal activities. I was interviewing Drin (a pseudonym) regarding his experience participating in the pyramid firms of the early 1990s. Reflecting on the legacy of the firms and the ongoing difficulties of securing a stable economic life, Drin lamented the corruption that plagued the city. To substantiate his claims, Drin referred to one of Fiksi’s infamous investigations, known as the “Stela files” (dosja Stela).

Stela was a 17-year-old girl who contacted Fiksi to report her collaboration with the Vlora police in framing various individuals on false rape charges. In her first interviews with Fiksi, Stela described her involvement in these operations and her desire to get out of the cycle of blackmail. She turned to Fiksi as a last resort. She confessed having blackmailed some of her own relatives (her uncle and her uncle’s father-in-law), who were subsequently pressured to pay large sums of money to the police to drop the charges. Stela wore Fiksi’s hidden cameras inside the anti-trafficking unit, recording, among other things, a conversation with her alleged handler.

The “Stela files” were one of the first of Fiksi’s investigations to target important public officials and to air video footage taken inside government offices. The case was debated in the media over weeks and months, with new revelations twisting the narrative in expected and unexpected ways. Thus, Stela’s own confessions—of working as a waitress and a spy for the Vlora anti-trafficking unit; of being drawn to the discos, the miniskirts, and the money of “these guys”; of “going to the car” (Fiks Fare 2005) with the police employees; and finally of framing her own uncle—together made her an easy target of public shaming and distrust. At the same time, her complicity also provided more credibility to her testimony. Stela knew the confidential codes of several police officers in the unit and, in the sting operation, spoke on a first name basis with her alleged handler. The case intensified when Stela was found brutally stabbed near her home only a few months after the videos aired on television.

Stela’s story brought flesh and blood to rumored and second-hand accounts of a growing number of young women who had become victims of human trafficking via blackmail and coercion, often through familial networks and relations. While these accounts were not accounted for in the official political discourse or in the justice system, stories of human trafficking were rampant in informal conversations and personal accounts.

A recent study by Jana Arsovska (2015) provides detailed accounts of such cases of trafficking, noting the role that family networks and relations have played in coercing victims to become collaborators.

Stela’s death, although officially attributed to a crime of passion by her ex-boyfriend, was widely interpreted as an act of retribution for her confessions at Fiksi. The case thus came to represent symptoms of a deep, dark form of corruption taking the shape of mafia stories that resembled those of Italian television series such as La Piovra or Hollywood films such as The Godfather. Fiksi often uses the soundtracks of these two as background for its video investigations. These images reinforced people’s informal discussions of the corrupt ties of local officials, especially police officials in Vlora, to trafficking networks and racketeering.

Fiksi’s hosts themselves made eerie jokes over mafia-like endings as they speculated over their own fate after the macabre end of the Stela case:

Saimiri. Where are you going to spend your vacation this year? At Lana? Beautiful!

Doktori. Why, where are you going to spend your vacation this year?

Saimiri. In Vlora, Dhërmi [a beach town near Vlora].

Doktori. That’s very courageous of you! [They cross themselves, alluding to the potential threat to Saimiri’s life]

Doktori. Then you’ll find your own ripped-up shirt and pants. (Fiks Fare, April 13, 2005)

In addition to the fear of possible retribution, the dark humor in this exchange also points to the blurred boundaries of guilt and innocence that permeate the show. The “ripped-up shirt and pants” alluded to a pair of ripped-up pants that were filed as evidence (and discussed at length by the media) in the false rape case that Stela admitted to have reported to the Vlora police. Earlier in the episode, Saimiri and Doktori had speculated over the credibility of this evidence (given Stela’s confession of manufacturing evidence for her police assignments). Saimiri suggested that Stela herself, perhaps, could have ripped up those pants before turning them over to the police. The dark humor around the ripped-up pants suggested complicity (of Stela and of Fiksi) and confusion regarding who are the guilty and who the innocent.

13. Vlora had been a major center of the pyramid firms’ activities and the site of the first antigovernmental protests that swept the whole nation.


15. I personally know several women who fell into a human trafficking trap via familial networks spread over migrant networks. For a detailed account of how such networks operate, see also Arsovska 2015.

16. La Piovra (“The Octopus”) was an Italian television miniseries produced in the 1980s and representing the affairs of the Mafia in Italy. The show depicted the Italian government and justice system as deeply intertwined with the Mafia. The show was also popular in a number of Communist countries in the late 1980s.

17. Reference to a highly polluted and unattractive stream that cuts through Tirana.
It is this generalized sense of complicity and of blurred notions of guilt and innocence that also frames people’s imagination and experience of dealing with the courts. In the investigations of Stela’s murder, the court found the ex-boyfriend guilty and denied any connection to Fiksi’s episodes. Yet the visual record of Stela’s conversations with the anti-trafficking police officers led many to believe that the latter were capable of anything. Hence most people I talked to read Stela’s death as retribution for her whistle-blowing. Drin was certain of this explanation for her death as well. To Drin, Fiksi’s video evidence was more believable than the official story of the courts. His own experience with Vlora public authorities, especially the police, compounded his trust in Fiksi’s version of the truth.

Drin’s assessment is consistent with other expressions of trust in Fiksi that I have encountered over the past decade. However, many viewers express ambivalence over Fiksi’s ethics of investigation, alleging that Fiksi takes bribes or blackmails officials. By its very design, the show presents a partial view of a transaction, which is often aired without the knowledge of the other party. Yet Fiksi’s ambivalent ethics and complicity in acts of corruption and blackmail ironically contribute to the audience’s trust in the veracity of the information presented in the show. As I argue below, it is precisely these muddled ethics and means of procuring evidence and the ordinary yet complex (real-life) characters in Fiksi’s investigations that give the show more strength and credibility vis-à-vis other anti-corruption agents, such as internationally funded indicators, local non-governmental organizations, or justice institutions.

In contrast with these failed (or less effective) actors, Fiksi continues to be popular and effective. Its ongoing success has confirmed that, in addition to being entertaining, the show enjoys widespread credibility as a whistle-blower. Indeed, Fiksi’s investigations are debated widely in the public sphere and in parliament; they have caused numerous resignations and dismissals of ministers, judges, police officials, and bureaucrats. They have prompted a few court cases (some leading to convictions, others not). What makes Fiksi so durable and credible, especially given its unorthodox forms of investigation and representation? To address this question, I bring together Fiksi’s representations of the everyday experience of corruption with accounts of similar experiences by ordinary Albanians.

Constituting Publics and Practices of Corruption

Compared with other anti-corruption agents and discourses, Fiksi ranks high for what Sarah Muir (2016) calls its “productivity.” In her study of postcrisis Argentina, Muir suggests that the widespread talk about “total corruption” is a marker of middle-class publics. In her example, the discourse of total corruption reproduces and reinforces class identity and solidarity (see also Osburg 2018). In a similar vein, Akhil Gupta (2012) outlines the various publics (the poor, the middle class, the low-level bureaucrats) that are constituted or constructed in and through representations of corruption in public culture in India. Similarly, I argue here that Fiksi narrates a general praxis of corruption and identifies specific publics of corruption in contemporary Albania.

One poignant case of corruption that Fiksi’s made public a few years ago was that of the rampant bribing at the district court of Puka, a small town in the northeast of the country (Fiks Fare 2013). In 2013, Fiksi undertook an investigation that lasted several months and resulted in the conviction of a prosecutor, an employee of the court, an attorney, and a sekser (fixer/broker) on charges ranging from abuse of power to passive corruption (accepting a bribe; Shqota E Gazetareve Për Dretjesi 2013). The investigation involved 150 hours of registered conversations by a resident of Puka, Pal Ndoka, who was asked to pay large sums of money for the release from prison of his kin arrested in a protest against exploitation at a mining company. When he sought Fiksi’s help, Ndoka had already paid around 2,000,000 lekë (approximately, US$20,000) for the release of four of his kin. Fiksi’s undercover journalists assisted Ndoka in obtaining digital evidence of the labyrinthine transactions with various sekserë who mediated a total of 600,000 lekë (US$6,000) in bribes to judges, attorneys, and other court staff for the release of his son.19

In addition to leading to actual court cases and convictions, the Puka investigations resonated with ordinary people by providing a visual narrative for practices and transactions that many experience in their dealings with the courts. For instance, in 2015, I talked with a family in the village of Vuno/Jalë (south of Vlora) who had sued state authorities for the unlawful bulldozing of their constructions on land that they claimed to be theirs based on the 1991 law on the privatization of agricultural land (law 7501). This was a highly publicized case that drew international attention. The bulldozing of a dozen self-built homes was justified as part of a tourism development project cofunded by the World Bank (Economist 2009). While claiming to help tourism development in the south, the bulldozing targeted precisely those local residents who had taken it upon themselves to invest in family-run tourist hotels and businesses.

Following an official complaint sent by a group of affected residents to its Washington, DC, headquarters, the World Bank withdrew funding from the project. The bank also provided legal training and funds for legal fees for the affected residents who filed court cases against state authorities demanding compensation for their damages and, most importantly, for securing their (legitimate) land titles. Although the law was clearly on their side, members of the family described how they had paid high bribes for securing the court decisions in their fa-

18. Elsewhere, I discuss the ineffectiveness of corruption indicators and of the justice system in tackling corruption in Albania (Musaraj 2015, 2018).

19. Allegations were made in these videos of cash payments requested for (and paid to) officials of the Tirana Court (a higher-level court) as well, but the latter did not lead to further prosecutions or convictions.
vior. When asked how they went about paying the bribes, the wife of the main claimant exclaimed, "It was not us who tried to bribe, their fixers (sekserë) found us. They know how to find you (E đenë ata si të gjetënë). We paid so much money to secure the verdict!" When I asked for more detail about the transactions with the sekserë, the wife and the husband referenced Fiksi’s investigations of the Puka case: "Did you see it on Fiksi? That’s exactly how it works (fiks ashtu funksionon) [in the courts]." For the Jalë families, Fiksi’s investigations made visible general patterns of corruption in the local courts that had touched their own lives.

Through its video footage and commentary, Fiksi constructs the geography of everyday corruption and identifies specific publics that engage in these practices. Thus, the Puka investigations followed the briber (Pal Ndoka) in multiple meetings with various intermediaries over the course of 4 months. A secretly recorded meeting with one such sekser reveals the nexus of bribing a court official: "the prosecutor does not release your son without receiving the coffee (pa marrë kafën). It [the coffee] costs six hundred thousand lekë [US$6,000]. Prosecutors and judges first receive their coffees then finish the jobs (mbarojnë punët)" (Top Channel Online 2013).

Giving or receiving "the coffee" refers to a widespread cultural practice of social life in Albania. It is a daily ritual to sit down in a café with friends or colleagues to drink coffee (typically an espresso). Among friends, the coffee is "given" as a token of friendship, with the expectation of it being reciprocated another time. Often, though, in business transactions or in the exchange of personal favors with public officials, "giving a coffee" (tu jap një kafë) to a person of power is a code word for offering a bribe or a favor. The giving of "the coffee" thus is an ambiguous expression that contains a wide range of possible meanings, from a pure expression of reciprocity and friendship to flat-out corruption. In the context of Ndoka’s transactions with the sekser, it became clear that "the coffee" entailed a hefty bribe. In the aftermath of this initial interaction with the sekser, the hidden cameras of Fiksi followed Ndoka in the coffee shops, parking lots, and public offices where the cash was given, counted, and split between the involved parties.

Watching these meetings, conversations, and transactions, one gains access to an alternative space where justice (or injustice) is negotiated in a manner that seems to be routine for the public officials involved. A heightened sense of uncertainty, unclear rules of engagement, and unpredictable outcomes characterize this world. The video recordings reveal something that is familiar to many viewers from firsthand experience or secondhand reports. Webs of sekserë (fixers) mediate informal encounters where quotas for court decisions are solicited, where cash is exchanged, often without any witnesses or written evidence that such transactions ever took place.

Among the publics and subjects in this picture, the sekser emerges as a key “figure of subject” (Membre and Roitman 1995) that marks postsocialist corruption. Explicit or implicit accusations of corruption were also pervasive during the Communist times, but these acts typically involved the use of personal connections (in njohur) and favors to access particular public goods (see also Ledeneva 1998; Yang 1994). By contrast, postsocialist forms of corruption are distinct in that money is key to the mediations between citizens and public officials (see also Humphrey 2002; Ledeneva 2006). Such transactions are mediated by sekserë who typically collect a commission for their risky services. In Fiksi’s footage and in everyday narratives, sekserë appear as savvy entrepreneurs that communicate and manage the financial dealings of these illicit transactions. They communicate the prices of the bribes, instruct givers on how and when to give, and ensure prompt payment. They also shield the main culprits—the judges and lawyers—from negotiating directly with the bribe givers or from direct exposure to potential hidden cameras or other witnesses. Sekserë actively interpellate yet another public—the victims of corruption. Whether it is the young woman who finds herself alienated from her family and exploited by the police, a worker in a mine without labor protection, or a lower-middle-class family trying to run a small tourism business, victims of corruption are “ordinary people” (njërcësit e tjetresë) who find themselves a target of blackmail by the police or the courts. While many of these individuals are poor or have a low income, their exclusion is mostly sociopolitical. The narrative structure of these transactions posits the bribe givers or whistle-blowers as unschooled in the habitus of corrupt dealings and as unwilling accomplices instructed (and coerced) by the sekserë. These visual characterizations of the publics engaged (willingly or unwillingly) in the acts of corruption resonate with accounts by people on the ground. In the course of identifying and constructing such subjects, Fiksi also provides a more general commentary on the form of the state in postsocialist Albania.

Complicit Anti-corruption and the Postsocialist State

Fiksi’s investigations are often performed by actors who are, at the very least, partially complicit in the acts of corruption. The show represents and further reproduces a particular culture of blackmail and distrust shared by both the perpetrators and the victims of corruption. Fiksi-style illicit recordings have become a witness of last resort for many who are situated at the extreme margins of the justice system in Albania; ironically, such methods of exposure have also become a warranty for politicians warding off potential fraud and blackmail. For instance, one infamous case that aired on Fiksi in 2011 featured a rare type of corruption: an instance of state capture (Fiks Fare 2011). Rare, because such forms of corruption are hard to witness and account for. The case in point involved the then-Deputy Minister and Member of Parliament Ilir Meta. Meta has been the head of the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), a minor party that splintered off from Socialist Party and

that has forged coalitions with both major parties (in 2009 with the Democratic Party, in 2013 with the Socialist Party). In November 2011, *Fiksi* aired videos of a conversation between Meta and the then—Minister of Economy and Member of Parliament Dritan Prifti. The videos were recorded by Prifti and submitted after Meta had fired Prifti.

In a conversation that lasts for just 10 minutes, Meta runs through a list of favors he demands from Prifti—among others, a “friendly” request to hire an LSI supporter for a government job and an overt directive to “give” a public procurement contract to a specific business group. The latter is cited in the conversation for having promised a 7% kickback (valued at €700,000) for the deal. Unlike the other cases discussed earlier, this was not an investigation coached by *Fiksi*’s staff but a surreptitious recording submitted to *Fiksi* weeks after it had occurred. In the video recording, Prifti performs a role similar to that of other whistle-blowers. He reluctantly agrees to Meta’s requests, showing disapproval that is quickly disciplined by Meta’s threatening question, “Is there something wrong?”

Meta resigned after the video went public, and prosecutor Ina Rama led an investigation that reached the level of the High Court. After multiple rounds of expert analysis of the video footage, the High Court ruled against the prosecutor’s case on account of “the lack of proof for the facts to be true” (High Court Verdict 2011, 8/1). The ruling was based on the court experts’ determination that the recordings were of too poor quality to count as evidence. Meta’s resignation was not the end of his political career. He returned to government as speaker of Parliament after joining a coalition government in 2013, this time with the Socialist Party.22 In 2017, Meta was elected president of Albania through bipartisan consensus.23

While confirming popular imaginaries of the corruption of the courts, the court ruling on the Meti—Prifti case did not undermine the credibility or use of sting operations as a means of exposing corruption and ensuring transparency. On the contrary, since this case, the use of surreptitious visual recordings as a means of citizen justice or blackmail has only intensified. Furthermore, other shows have since replicated *Fiksi*’s formula. Government bodies (including the police) and even politicians who have historically dismissed *Fiksi*’s forms of investigation have also begun to encourage similar forms of denunciation via media technologies as a way to combat corruption.24 Government institutions even solicit submissions from the public, thus replicating *Fiksi*’s own established practice of investigation based on popular reporting.

By making illicit transactions visible to a mass audience, *Fiksi* advocates and performs a form of anti-corruption that relies on the use of media technologies—hidden cameras, telephones, and wiretapping—as alternative witnesses, as technologies of transparency in a context where the formal justice system fails its citizens. This use of the digital as a technology of transparency reflects a broader ideology shared by international bodies (especially the US Agency for International Development) that advocated e-governance as a quick fix for corruption. Similar initiatives promoted around the world often obscure class conflicts and socioeconomic struggles over access to and redistribution of resources by a language of corporate accountability (see also Mazzarella 2006; Morris 2004). *Fiksi* certainly embodies this faith in the visual, the digital, and the raw recordings as trusted witnesses, as technologies of transparency. Yet *Fiksi*’s digital transparency departs from the global corporate ethics of e-governance precisely because of its overt complicity, partiality, and intimacy with the perpetrators of corruption. As evident in all the cases discussed above, the very techniques of investigation—sting operations—can be obtained only through actors who are at least partially complicit. In addition, *Fiksi*’s anti-corruption is inseparable from its unique style of representations—a combination of cynical satire and vulgar aesthetics.

### Cynical Satire and Vulgar Aesthetics as (Ambivalent) Political Critique

*Fiksi*’s methods of investigation and style of presentation are deeply grounded in local histories of political dissent and cultures of critique that predate the anti-corruption movement of the new millennium. Indeed, *Fiksi*’s style is inseparable from the life story of its founder, Filip Çakuli. The show’s style is informed by Çakuli’s lifelong training and experience in late-socialist humor.

Çakuli was trained as a journalist during the late-socialist regime. In the 1980s, Çakuli wrote for *Hosteni* ("The Goat"), the only satirical journal published under the Communist regime. Although connected to the officials of the regime, Çakuli was punished for a couple of jokes that were considered politically inappropriate. One such joke broadcast live in an interview with Radio Tirana, the state radio channel. It went as follows:

In a meeting held between the minister of agriculture, comrade Pali Miska, and villagers and cooperative members of Myzeqe, among others, Miska told us three things that we didn’t know. “First: Wheat is planted on the ground. Second: When wheat is ripe, it is harvested! And third: From wheat flour, we make bread!” All the villagers burst into vigorous clapping. (retold in Çela 2007:8)

Çakuli’s jokes embodied a style of humor that emerged under one of the most extreme authoritarian Communist regimes under the leadership of Enver Hoxha, who held on to power.
as head of state and leader of the Party of Labor of Albania from 1944 to 1985. The jokes resonate with the Russian stiob humor, popular in the former Soviet Union. Alexei Yurchak (2006) has described stiob as ironic and absurd humor that “required such a degree of overidentification with the object, person, or idea at which it was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two” (Yurchak 2006:250). This overidentification as a form of satire emerged in a context of “hypernormalization” (Yurchak 2006:50) of the official discourse; this was a discourse saturated with “overcrafted, repetitive and frequently esoteric formulations that distanced the authoritative discourse of socialism from its desired intimate connection with the language and thinking of its citizen subjects” (Boyer and Yurchak 2010:182). Albanian writer and critic Ardian Vehbiu describes a similar process of transformation of Communist discourse into a “totalitarian” language (Vehbiu 2008) that eliminated all dialects, slang, and word play from standard Albanian. By simply mimicking this over- formalized style of discourse, by exposing its absurdity, one performed critique. This was precisely the form of Çakuli’s famous jokes—they mimicked the inflated speeches about the overinflated and formalistic speeches by high-level officials, thus exposing the absurdity and emptiness of official claims to economic progress and expertise.

Disenchanted with the Communist regime, in the early 1990s, Çakuli joined the democracy movement. When the Democratic Party came to power in 1992, he took on the role of editor of the transformed Hosteni, which now ran under a different (right-leaning) editorial board and with a pro-Democratic Party stance (Top Channel Online 2010). During this time, authoritarian leader Sali Berisha consolidated his power in the party (alienating many of the original leaders of the opposition) and in government (Abrahams 2015). Once an ally, Berisha became an enemy of Çakuli when the latter planned to run a cover with a caricature of Berisha surrounded by two prostitutes (Dita 2014, 2015).

As this (censored) cover exemplified, Çakuli’s postsocialist humor embraced the cynical and sexually explicit vernacular that had become pervasive in everyday speech. This new style of humor was, in part, a reaction against the highly moralizing and censored formal speech of Communist discourse; it was also partly influenced by the Berlusconi mediaseate television shows, a source of inspiration for private television channels in 1990s Albania; finally, the style articulated the pervasive sense of cynicism and powerlessness felt by a second failure of the state in postsocialist Albania.

In its routine coverage of politicians, Fiksi deploys the “stiob sensibility” (Boyer and Yurchak 2010:183) of late-socialist humor. During Berisha’s two consecutive terms as prime minister (2005–2013), for instance, the show routinely performed acts of overidentification with his style of discourse. At the same time, Fiksi’s style and aesthetics depart from the stiob humor in a number of ways. For one thing, the show’s humor resonates with other forms of cynical satire in late-liberal contexts (Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Haugeraud 2012; Molé 2013). Second, the show marks a break from Communist humor in adopting an explicitly sexualized discourse. In this, the discourse of the show resembles what Achille Mbembe identifies as the vulgar aesthetics of political humor in the context of the postcolony (2001). In Fiksi, this is realized mainly through the gendered and sexist setup of the show.

The cohosts perform a masculine subjectivity that is never entirely serious nor committed to a particular ethic; they can only speak about political matters through humor and sarcasm, embracing an ethic of amorality and futility. The following exchange between Saimiri and Doktori, the iconic cohosts from 2002 through 2013, captures the spirit that runs through the show:

**Saimiri.** God came down to earth to see what he had done a long time ago when he had created earth. He went this way, he went that way and, poor God, he couldn’t recognize anything the way he had first made it. He came to Albania and was so touched! “Here it is, the earth, the way I had created it!” This is how he found Albania, like he had left it millions of years ago.

**Doktori.** You know what kids answer when you ask them “do you know where God is?”

**Saimir.** [chuckling] No, I don’t. Tell me.

**Doktori.** A kindergarten teacher asked a child, “Do you know where God is?” and the child replied, “Yes, I know. It is in my bathroom.” “But why?” asked the teacher. “Because every time I wake up in the morning I hear my dad banging at the bathroom door, shouting ‘God, you’re still in there!’” He was talking to the mother but the kid didn’t know. (Fiks Fare, April 13, 2005)

27. *One of Fiks’s longest-running hosts was nicknamed “Doktori,” an appropriation of Berisha’s nickname (evoking his previous career as a cardiologist), which was used disparagingly by his opponents. Furthermore, the analogy between Berisha’s and Hoxha’s styles of governing and speech is a running theme in the show.*

28. From 2002 to 2013, these cohosts were publicly known as Saimiri and Doktori. In 2013, Saimiri left the show and took up an offer from Agon Channel. From 2013 to 2016, the show was cohosted by Doktori and the female host Fiori Darsha. It is recently hosted by two new male cohosts, Dorian Ramalii and Devis Muka.
Saimiri’s joke represents a common narrative of the country’s “lagging behind” an imagined historical progression toward a desired modernity. It echoes an expression widely used by local residents, who often vent, “This country cannot become” (ky vend nuk bëhet). Doktori’s joke, on the other hand, sidelines teleology, progress, becoming, and religion. Instead, it undermines the sacred through the intimacy and banality of the domestic. Indeed, banal intimacies were regularly evoked in the small talk between Saimiri and Doktori as a means of ridiculing public officials. Saimiri and Doktori’s jokes, their comments to the dancers and to one another, were steeped in sexual innuendo; they overdetermined with a culture of hypermasculinity that is ubiquitous in bureaucratic spaces. Gendered dynamics came through in the Stela files, for instance: cases of sexual harassment or solicitation of sexual favors for public services have indeed been a frequent target of Fiksi’s hidden cameras. In their interactions on the screen, Saimiri and Doktori overidentified with these forms of masculinity on display in the televised acts of corruption.

My attention to masculinity in representations of corruption at Fiksi resonates with several other accounts in this issue of Current Anthropology that emphasize different forms of gendered (typically male) socialities that mediate transactions deemed as corruption (see especially Osburg 2018; Schneider 2018). Often, these gendered subjectivities are rooted in localized forms of sociality and solidarity. In their interactions and body language, in their benign stupidity, Fiksi’s cohosts enact the everyday, banal intimacies between neighborhood buddies (çunat e lagjes). This is a figure of subject that had become a staple of street life in postsocialist Albania—namely, young men, often unemployed, who hang out on street corners or in neighborhood coffee shops, killing time together by engaging in rapid-fire exchanges of inside jokes about politics, about the everyday, and about nothing. Their small talk is infused with crass, sexually explicit, irreverent speech. Fiksi’s style of discourse mirrors official speech as well. Indeed, similar banal and vulgar statements are routinely exchanged among politicians in public venues such as the parliament.

In continuously replicating these forms of masculinity, Fiksi overidentifies both with figures of power and with those excluded from power. In so doing, the show generates a commentary on contemporary forms of power and of governmentality. Here the intimacy of talk among the cohosts intertwines with the “intimacy of tyranny” (Mbembe 2001:128) experienced in postsocialist and, in this case, postsocialist autocratic regimes. It is this intimacy and complicity with figures of power that makes this anti-corruption discourse effective while also trapping subjects in a closed loop of obligation and subjection.

Conclusion

In postsocialist and post-Ponzi Albania, corruption, as a discursive category, has become the ball kicked around by all political parties (Kajsiu 2016), creating an atmosphere akin to that of “total corruption” (Muir 2016) found in other postcrisis contexts. Fiksi’s cases confirm this atmosphere of total corruption by drawing upon witnesses who are also complicit in illicit transactions with public authorities. Through its particular technologies of representation and circulation, Fiksi provides a para-ethnography (Holmes and Marcus 2005) of the everyday experience of corruption. Unlike global technologies of corruption and transparency that present corruption in a bureaucratic form (e.g., the survey and statistical data), Fiksi thrives on the intimate relations between victims, intermediaries, and witnesses of corrupt transactions.

By detailing these transactions, the show captures and further constructs various publics engaged in the alleged corruption. Among others, here I discussed the figure of the sekserë, the entrepreneurial intermediaries of corruption, the public officials, and the victims of corruption. The latter are often described as ordinary people excluded from networks of power and unschooled in the business of bribing and favoritism who become unwilling participants in the illicit networks and transactions, often for the purpose of obtaining justice and inclusion. Fiksi’s viewers relate their own experiences with public officials to those of the victims of corruption featured in the show and thus come to imagine their experiences as part of a national public. At the same time, Fiksi’s ethically ambivalent practices also provide a justification for the complicity of these viewers/victims in illicit transactions.

Fiksi’s normalizing effect calls attention to the implications of its genres of representation. Its own complicity in the acts and forms of illicit transactions plays to the show’s strength as a whistle-blower and truth-teller; but it also constitutes its weakness, because it reproduces a muddled justice and ethics and normalizes coercive power. Fiksi thus provides a broader commentary on the state in postsocialist Albania that resonates well with other similar postdevelopment and postcolonial contexts in which local political institutions lack the power to enforce economic and political policies that best serve constituents (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). In these contexts, the use of vulgar aesthetics and cynical humor is inherently an ambivalent form of political critique in so far as it does not offer a way out of the vicious circle of complicity.

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A Tale of Two Mayors
Configurations of Care and Corruption in Eastern Indonesian Direct District Head Elections

by Sylvia Tidey

In this article, I discuss three rounds of direct district head elections that took place in Kupang, in eastern Indonesia, between 2007 and 2012. The right to vote directly for a district head formed part of wider processes of state reformation (reformasi) aimed to promote democratization, anti-corruption, and good governance in the wake of former president Suharto’s resignation from office in 1998. In spite of such reforms, corruption and clientelism in Indonesian politics persist, leading some scholars to view corruption as the main culprit for Indonesia’s failure to transition to a “meaningful” or “liberal” democracy. Eschewing such a view of corruption as a diagnosis for a failure to democratize, I instead ask what productive work corruption, conceived of as a transgression of political care, can do in assessing the consequences of anti-corruption efforts. Political care grounded in recognition, as I will show, is not necessarily tied to a politics of good governance, yet it also does not easily fall under an extension of clientelism. Anti-corruption efforts, then, rather than eradicating corruption, can instead delineate just how much “bad” governance people are willing to put up with as long as they feel seen and cared for.

Corruption and Care

In May 2008, a few weeks before the first-ever gubernatorial elections were to take place in the eastern Indonesian province of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), I asked Nurul, a 30-year-old woman who was a market vendor in the provincial capital of Kupang, what her thoughts on the upcoming elections were. She told me,

I want whoever wins to take care of the small people. I vote not from ethnicity or religion but just from my heart. I hope that they can see all of society. I only hope the government will free school fees and won’t do KKN. The important thing is that they don’t make the lives of us small folk any harder.

The right to vote directly for a district head was one that had been granted only a few years earlier, as part of a long, drawn-out process of political and administrative state reformation (reformasi) that took place in the wake of former president Suharto’s resignation from office in 1998. A perfect storm of a monetary crisis, environmental disaster, and widespread student protests culminated in the end of Suharto’s three-decade-long authoritarian New Order regime and paved the way for International Monetary Fund (IMF)–promoted neoliberal good governance reforms, in which anti-corruption efforts figured prominently. During Suharto’s New Order, Nurul and others like her—poor urban and rural voters without direct ties to the entrenched political, military, and bureaucratic state-amalgam—formed part of a depoliticized “floating mass” (masa mengambung) whose political influence was limited to participation in the meticulously organized national elections, held every 5 years, that always resulted in a victory for Suharto and his ruling Golkar Party. For the “small people,” the post-reformasi implementation of direct district head elections arguably formed the most important change in their relationship with political elites. For Nurul, this change meant that she began to contemplate the hope that “they”—the government or whoever would win the elections—would finally “see all of society” and “take care of the small people.” An example of the kind of care she hoped for, and that was supported by her motivation to vote “from the heart” rather than “from ethnicity or religion,” was the abolition of tuition fees. Yet, overshadowing this possibility for care and recognition was the ever-present chance that “they,” instead, would “do KKN”—a popular acronym in Indonesia that means korupsi, kolusi, dan nepotisme, by which corruption is commonly known—and only add to the hardships that the “small folk” face. Given the omnipresence of anti-corruption rhetoric and initiatives in Indonesia, it is not surprising that, for Nurul, corruption emerges as the antithesis of care.

The shadow corruption casts over Indonesian politics is not new. In fact, Suharto rose to power in part because of his promise to tackle corruption (Robertson-Snape 1999). However, by the

Sylvia Tidey is Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology and Global Studies Program at the University of Virginia (Charlottesville, Virginia 22903, USA [st3fx@virginia.edu]). This paper was submitted 6 IV 17, accepted 7 XI 17, and electronically published 2 III 18.
time students took to the streets in the late 1990s to demand democratic reforms and protest the rampant KKN of Suharto’s regime. Indonesian dissatisfaction coincided with a post-Cold War international preoccupation with anti-corruption and good governance. After Suharto’s resignation in 1998, Indonesia implemented a range of structural measures to change the institutional framework in which corruption had become so entrenched (Robison 2006). These included a devotion of economic and political power from center to regions that unfolded so rapidly that the World Bank labeled Indonesia’s transformation from “one of the most centralized systems in the world into one of the most decentralized” a “Big Bang” (Bubandt 2006:413). However, in spite of such far-reaching reforms to stimulate democratization, critics claim that, instead of having achieved the preferred end stage of “meaningful” (Hadiz 2008; Törnquist 2008) or “liberal” (Bünte and Ufen 2009:6–7) democracy, Indonesia is stuck in a “protracted transition” (Malley 2000), and its democracy is categorized as “predatory” (Robison 2002), of “low quality” (Mietzner 2009), and “patrimonial” (Webber 2006). The culprit for the failure to democratize is, then, the continued presence of corruption and, in particular, the lingering influence of patrimonial or clientelist politics (Choi 2009; Hadiz and Robison 2013; Robison 2002; Schulte Nordholt 2004). Here, rather than viewing corruption as a diagnosis for a failure to democratize, I want to consider how corruption figured in post-reformasi processes of recrafting relationships of care and recognition between the “small people” and political elites.

The charge of corruption is a particularly weighty one in Kupang, where I conducted fieldwork in government offices for 12 months between 2007 and 2009. Kupang is the capital of the eastern Indonesian province of NTT and has approximately 330,000 inhabitants. While Indonesia is home to the world’s largest Muslim population, NTT and Kupang are predominantly Protestant and Catholic.1 NTT is among the poorest provinces of Indonesia (Expo NTT 2016). Its infant mortality rate, educational standards, and economic growth all lag behind those of most other Indonesian provinces (World Bank 2007). It is not surprising, therefore, that people would jokingly tell me that the acronym NTT actually stood for Nanti Tuhan Tolong (God will help later) or Nasib Tak Tentu (uncertain fate). In the same year that Nurul offered her thoughts on the upcoming elections, furthermore, Transparency International elected Kupang as Indonesia’s most corrupt town (Melayu Online 2009). Although anti-corruption rhetoric had firmly entered Kupang and talk of corruption formed a part of everyday conversations, it was not exactly clear to most Kupangese what actually constituted KKN (Tidye 2016). Existing simplistic legal definitions of corruption did not account for the complex entanglements of relationality, gift-giving, and ethics that make it hard to pinpoint what exactly counts as corruption. As Akhil Gupta and Sarah Muir propose in the introduction to this issue of Current Anthropology, corruption tends to elide definitions and is perhaps best understood as a “category of transgression” (Muir and Gupta 2018). In this article, I propose we take our cues regarding how to understand corruption from Nurul and other poor urban voters like her, for whom the problem of corruption comes down to the fact that politicians do not “see” or “take care of” them. In the context of elections in Kupang, corruption, then, signals a transgression of political care.2

In what follows, I discuss three rounds of local elections in Kupang to show how the “small people” and politicians navigated the change in electoral relationship instigated by the implementation of direct district head elections. I ask what productive work corruption, conceived of as a transgression of political care rather than, for instance, a diagnosis of failure, can do in assessing the consequences of anti-corruption efforts. I suggest it opens up the apparent contradiction between liberal citizenship and clientelism that colors the linear progress narrative of good governance and democratization (Robins, Cornwall, and von Lieres 2008:1076) to ethically and temporally far messier political processes on the ground. If proponents of good governance understand “political progress” in terms of temporality—as a transition to democracy—and understand corruption to be a hindrance to this temporal process, “small people” like Nurul understand it in terms of relationality—as a demonstration of care rooted in recognition—and understand corruption as a betrayal of political care. Political care grounded in recognition, then, is not necessarily tied to a politics of good governance, yet it also does not easily fall under an extension of clientelism. Anti-corruption efforts, rather than eradicating corruption, can instead delineate just how much “bad” governance people are willing to put up with as long as they feel seen and thus cared for.

Post-reformasi Anti-corruption Efforts: Are We “Still Stupid”?

Indonesia joined the so-called third wave of democratization (Huntington 1991) rather belatedly. Until 1998, Indonesia had been an authoritarian, centralistic regime under the tight control of President Suharto, who had come to power during 1965–1966 after successfully staging a military coup. Although Suharto became notorious for his corruption and cronynism, his leadership as well as the legitimacy of his New Order regime remained generally uncontested while Indonesians continued to experience economic growth (thanks in part to huge oil and gas revenues) throughout the 1970s and 1980s. By the 1990s, however, Suharto’s grip on power slowly loosened as influential Muslim organizations started to criticize the ruling

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1. According to the Department of Statistics, in 2014 approximately 65% of Kupang’s 384,112 inhabitants were Protestant, 20% were Catholic, and 12% were Muslim (https://kupangkota.bps.go.id/linkTableDynamisView?id=69).

2. I want to thank one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper for proposing the term “political care” as helpful here.
elite, nascent civil society groups began to protest human rights abuses, and trade unions and new political parties—all though officially banned—started to emerge. When the Asian financial crisis hit Indonesia in 1997, the IMF subsequently demanded a strict austerity course, an improved supervision of banks, and an enforcement of deregulation measures in order for Indonesia to receive a financial bailout; students took to the streets in early 1998 demanding sweeping reforms, democracy, and an end to corruption (Bünte and Ufen 2009; Schulte Nordholt and Hoogeboom 2006).

Under these pressures, Suharto finally stepped down in May 1998, which ushered in a period of political reforms in promotion of democratization under the ideological banner of good governance, supported by the international community. In 1999, the Indonesian government introduced parliamentary elections, liberalized press laws, and allowed political parties and trade unions to operate freely. In 2002, it established a Corruption Eradication Commission, auditing bodies, and anti-corruption courts. In 2004, furthermore, it announced the implementation of direct election of district heads from 2005 onward (Schulte Nordholt 2008). Yet scholars of Indonesian politics find that this otherwise impressive march toward democratization has been accompanied by some undemocratic disappointments. Post-Suharto Indonesia has also seen a continuation of military influence, a consolidation of local oligarchies, a revival of primordialism, and an inability to ensure the rule of law (Bünte 2009; Bünte and Ufen 2009:22–23). In this weak legal context, and in spite of anti-corruption rhetoric and institutions, all kinds of corruption persist, ranging from vote-selling practices to civil service entrance fees and money politics, as people in Kupang would no doubt agree (Choi 2004; Kristiansen and Ramli 2006; Tidey 2013). Particularly worrisome to some Indonesianists, the neopatrimonialism that characterized Suharto’s centralistic New Order rule continues to flourish in the newly decentralized Indonesia (Choi 2009; Hadiz and Robison 2013; Robison 2002; Schulte Nordholt 2004; Schütte 2009). The hoped-for transition to good governance, then, seemed thwarted by a continuation of “bad,” clientelist, and otherwise corrupt practices.

As Kregg Hetherington shows us, writing on the Luguista coalition’s struggle to restructure the Paraguayan state in his contribution to this issue of Current Anthropology, the contemporary preoccupation with corruption as an impediment to good governance is not unique to Indonesia but fits within a more general post-Cold War wave of liberalism (Hetherington 2018; see also Guilhaout 2005). Convinced that the personalization of power, corruption, and unelected governments were responsible for the failure of structural adjustment programs, international development institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF started to promote a good governance agenda by the mid-1990s. Among other things, this agenda considered values of transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption to be pivotal to a country’s transition to democracy (Hough 2013; Weiss 2000). In Indonesia, as we have seen, the IMF made good governance a nonnegotiable condition of the bailout package that it offered after Indonesia’s financial collapse in 1997 (Thompson 2004). However, “corruption” has functioned as a diagnosis of a vestigial pathology (Hetherington 2018) that stands in the way of political liberalization since long before the neoliberal interest in good governance; most notably, it has been used to explain the failure of those states that gained their independence after World War II to achieve the end stages of capitalism and development as set out in modernization theory (Pierce 2016:17). In this sense, good governance, with its emphasis on anti-corruption, is but the latest reenactment of a steadfast fantasy of progress that fuels the logic of liberalism (Edelman 2004; Zigon 2013).

Such fantasies of progress are projected not just temporally but also geographically onto non-Western elsewhere, with little questioning of the teleological assumptions that underlie those fantasies or the moral-ethical self-evidence of good governance and with little reflection on existing global political and economic power dynamics and inequalities. The yearly lists published by anti-corruption watchdogs, such as Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, similarly confirm this geographical division between “not yet” and “already there” countries. However, anthropologists of corruption have grown increasingly critical of this tendency to frame corruption as endemic to non-Western countries. Crisis Shore and Dieter Haller (2005:18), for instance, criticize how the tendency to stress the abuse of public office for private gain in definitions of corrup-

3. We can, for instance, recall political scientists’ deployment of neopatrimonialism to explain African states’ failure to modernize in the 1970s and 1980s (see Pierce 2016:16–17). Under the sway of modernization theory, which dominated international postwar development thinking and advanced a universal sequence of political and economic development, newly independent African states were expected to achieve capitalism and development with more speed and less trouble than the “West” had done. When this did not happen according to plan, instead of questioning the teleological underpinnings of modernization theory, political scientists blamed this failure to modernize on the persistence of patrimonial logics within modern bureaucratic apparatuses. We can discern a similar trend in the contemporary analytical utilization of neopatrimonialism to explain Indonesia’s failure to democratize. Although present-day debates on neopatrimonialism in Indonesia take place against the ideological backdrop of a neoliberal discourse of good governance and have democratization instead of modernization as their topic, the analytical reliance on the hindering influence of patrimonial logics suggests a similar reluctance to criticize the developmental progress narrative fueling this discourse.

4. I borrow this notion of the fantasy of progress from Jarrett Zigon (2013:731–732), who writes against the notion of human rights as a kind of moral progress. Rather than offering the possibility for something politically new (and here we can substitute “good governance” for human rights, because human rights are tied to post-Cold War good governance ideology and democracy building), human rights discourse inevitably draws on the same socioeconomic-political conditions that it wants to overcome. Instead of offering progress, there is thus a reproduction of the present in a way that is fundamental to the logics of liberalism—the seductive fantasy of overcoming an imperfect present that gets projected onto the future (see also Edelman 2004).
tion has served to highlight public sector corruption in non-Western countries while leaving private sector corruption or corporate crimes to go largely unacknowledged in spite of their prevalence in the so-called West (see also MacLennan 2005; Shore 2005, 2018). More cynical voices even doubt whether overcoming this geographical disparity is the actual goal of recent anti-corruption efforts, or whether good governance is merely the latest form of "aid conditionality" (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006:6) and anti-corruption simply "the new stick to beat non-Western governments into compliance with the economic and political agenda of the United States and the dictates of global capitalism" (Shore and Haller 2005:19).

Yet, in Kupang, rather than taking such a critical view toward anti-corruption initiatives and good governance in general, most people would corroborate this sense of geographical disparity. As I was constantly told, Kupang, NTT, and even Indonesia as a whole were simply "not yet developed" (belum maju) and "still transitioning" (masih transisi). Some would contrast Indonesia with an idealized Barat (West), like Amerika or Belanda (The Netherlands), which they imagined certainly to be "already developed" (sudah maju) and "free from KKN" (bebas dari KKN). The problem with the persistence of corruption in an age of anti-corruption, so lower-level civil servants, department heads, and politicians would claim, was that people in Kupang, from the uneducated poor to those with cushy civil service positions, were "still stupid" (masih bodoh) and "not yet ready" (belum siap) for the new democratic state system. In the context of this self-Orientalizing critique, Transparency International’s naming of Kupang as Indonesia’s most corrupt town in 2008 (Melayu Online 2009) merely confirmed suspicions Kupangese already had: we are, indeed, "still stupid" and "not yet ready" for democracy.

This dissatisfaction and the related self-accusations people in Kupang voiced in the aftermath of reformasi fit well within the larger progress narrative of good governance, discussed above, in which corruption figures as a diagnosis of a "vestigial pathology" that stands in the way of democratization. Rather than perpetuating this view of corruption as a diagnosis of failure, however, I propose that we consider it to be a transgression of political care, understood as founded in being recognized—or seen, as Nurul phrased it—it as political subjects by political elites. Let us therefore turn to three consecutive rounds of direct district head elections that took place in Kupang between 2007 and 2012 to consider how recognition came to figure as an indication of political care and corruption as its transgression.

Mayoral Elections of 2007: A Victory of Anti-corruption

The mayoral elections that took place on May 21, 2007, were Kupang’s first-ever direct district elections. During Suharto’s New Order, the task of electing mayors, regents, and governors, although formally the prerogative of regional parliaments, was effectively in the hands of the minister of internal affairs and Suharto himself (Schulte Nordholt 2008:26). For aspiring district heads, this meant that maintaining loyalties upward mattered more than concerning oneself with the desires and hopes of the “floating mass” outside the clientelist amalgam of the Golkar Party, bureaucracy, military, and business. When post-reformasi decentralization measures untangled these complex cozy alliances and increased voters’ electoral powers, it soon became clear that things had changed: during the first rounds of direct district heads elections in 2005, voters across Indonesia voted out known corrupt incumbents en masse (Mietzner 2006). If New Order political success had depended on limited recognition and excluding forms of care, post-reformasi political success appeared to depend on more inclusive forms of care and, to paraphrase Nurul, at least “seeing” more of society. How did candidates for the 2007 mayoral elections perform such more inclusive forms of political care?

The main opponents during the 2007 mayoral race in Kupang were Dan Adoe and Yonas Salean. They served as the deputy mayor and the regional secretory, respectively, at the time of the elections, making them second and third in command in the city-level bureaucratic hierarchy after the mayor. The mayor at that time, S. K. Lerik, had been firmly in office for 21 years—longer than any other mayor in Indonesia—but would not himself run. Both Salean and Adoe were career bureaucrats. Both candidates had been fervent supporters of the Golkar Party, the party most intimately associated with Suharto’s New Order regime, which remained popular among civil servants even after the end of the New Order.

Salean and Adoe exemplified contrasting kinds of post-reformasi mayoral candidates. Salean represented a continuation of the New Order status quo. He had the full support of Mayor Lerik and the backing of the Golkar Party. Lerik, as civil servants would tell me with more than a hint of admiration and pride, was a real leader who had a tight grip on civil service. He had been in office for an impressive 21 years because he knew how to manage his superiors and keep his subordinates

5. I should note, however, that international development institutions increasingly acknowledge private sector corruption and other forms of non-public sector corruption. The World Bank, for example, while continuing to adhere to the definition of corruption as "the abuse of public office for private gain," does recognize the occurrence of bribery in the private sector (http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/anticorrupt/corrupt/cor02.htm).


6. Although I used pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of most of my interlocutors, I chose to use the real names of the various politicians I describe here. Since a simple Google search would reveal who these politicians are, the use of pseudonyms would, in my opinion, merely provide a false sense of anonymity.
under control. He embodied the New Order–era masculine leadership style of Bapakisme ("Fatherism"), combining strict authoritarianism with the clientelist dispersion of formal and informal favors to loyal subordinates (Shiraishi 1997). One reason for his staying power, and this is where some doubt crept into the admiring tone civil servants used to describe Lerik, was that he had filled many positions in civil service based on favoritism rather than merit. By filling strategic positions with loyal allies, Lerik was able to ensure his position at the top of Kupang’s bureaucracy. Some speculated that Lerik had hired Salean as his regional secretary for similar strategic reasons, because other eligible candidates for the position exceeded him in experience, skills, and seniority. One civil servant described Lerik and Salean as “corruption friends” (teman korupsi) and “collusion friends” (teman kolusi).

In his campaigning, Salean embraced the continuation of this Bapakist style of leadership and gave little indication that he would take a course different from that of his predecessor. For example, in a generous attempt to appeal to voters, he promised to open up a thousand temporary civil service positions after he got elected, conveniently ignoring a national moratorium on such hires. This was not the first time that he ignored rules in order to profit from creating temporary positions. In November 2008, the director of PIAR (Perkum-pulan Pengembangan Inisiatif dan Advokasi Rakyat, or the Association for Initiative Development and Advocacy for the People), an anti-corruption agency in Kupang, told me that she had suspected Salean of tampering with hiring processes for a long time but that finding proof of his kolusi and nepo-tisme was difficult. Yet, after painstaking investigations, she finally had something to potentially show media outlets or local courts in support of her long-harbored suspicions against Salean. Namely, she came into the possession of photocopies of the senior high school diploma and civil service acceptance form of one of Salean’s nieces. The dates on these forms showed that the niece got accepted as a temporary worker into civil service a year before she graduated from high school, even though having a high school diploma is an official requirement for acceptance. The director doubted that Salean’s niece ever showed up at the department where she supposedly worked or even received any kind of payment. Most likely her “fictive” status merely served as a stepping stone to a permanent civil service position.

During an interview I had with Salean in 2009, I asked him whether he had ever used his influential civil service position to help family members.

That happened, because the meaning of our life here in Kupang is that family is important. If we have problems or difficulties, it is, in the first place, family that is there for us. So several family members have come [to me] and asked, for instance, about their child who wants to become a civil servant or temporary worker. I, then, order the Human Resources Department to look into them. Even though they are family, we don’t want them to embarrass us who have leadership positions in civil service. So, they [Human Resources] investigate if they indeed have the skills. If family members want to become civil servants, they ought to be given positions in line with their abilities.

Salean expressed no moral qualms about hiring family members—especially since he made sure to check whether they are actually qualified. While some might characterize this as a form of corruption—or, to be more precise, collusion—Salean cast himself as an ethical family member in a manner that fits seamlessly with a longer national history in which “real” Bapakist leaders are morally bound to their subordinates. He did not seem too perturbed about the effects of anti-corruption rules on the outcomes of elections, telling me that, “our culture is not yet ready to accept these actual rules.” According to him, instead of preferring candidates who promoted a post-reformasi anti-corruption stance, voters wanted a New Order–style authoritarian candidate who could deliver tangible goods, such as civil service positions, even if this meant flouting official rules and flirting with corruption.

Adoe, in contrast, positioned himself as the anti-corruption candidate and appealed to voters’ desire for change. This was not entirely by choice. When Golkar and Mayor Lerik decided to support Salean over him, they merely completed what had been a longer trajectory of effectively excluding Adoe from city-level government. Civil servants who had been around for years told me that Lerik had habitually bypassed Adoe, his second-in-command, for Salean in decision-making processes. Apparently, Adoe had not been a part of the circle of “corruption friends.” Lacking the backing of the party that he had supported throughout his bureaucratic career, he accepted the support of a hastily cobbled-together coalition of 10 political parties, only one of which had seats in local parliament, and which included a few Muslim parties. In Kupang, where the vast majority of inhabitants are Christian and where anti-Muslim sentiments at times run high, this seemed like a guaranteed way to lose. Still, riding the post-reformasi wave of anti-corruption

7. The metaphor of family has a long history in Indonesian bureaucratic organizations. Since the very conception of the Indonesian nationalist project in the early twentieth century, the idea that the Indonesian state ought to be organized on the basis of a “family principle” (azaskekeluargaan), derived from the Indonesian word for family, keluarga, has been a fundamental part of the project of state formation (Boellstorff 2005; Bourchier 1997, 2015; Steedly 2013:203–207). In these ambivalent family-cum-state dynamics, the figure of the father forms the pinnacle of authority, precariously combining the legal-rational authority of the state with the traditional authority of heading a family. The particular personalistic-professional ties that bind “fathers” (bureaucratic superiors) and their “children” (bureaucratic subordinates), commonly known as “Fatherism” (Bapakisme), have long formed potential sources of circumvention or defiance of official rules and chains of command (Shiraishi 1997; Suryakusuma 1997).

8. One only needs to consider the president of the United States’ acceptance of his daughter and son-in-law into his administration to realize there is nothing particularly Indonesian about this example.
sentiments and a desire for political change, his campaign emphasized his “clean” reputation and intention to rid Kupang of corruption.

As it turned out, voters were receptive to Adoe’s anti-corruption message. Over 26% of voters voted for Dan Adoe, his running mate Dan Hurek, and their Muslim coalition. The second and third place also consisted of candidates who were backed by coalition parties rather than by a single big party. Salean and the Golkar Party received a mere 16% of the votes and came in fourth. According to a contributor to the local online news blog NTT News, these results showed what people prized in candidates.

This victory is the result of Adoe’s oppressed image and Hurek’s consistency. Because Adoe was always marginalized by Lerik, he has a special place in the hearts of residents. Hurek is preferred because as a parliament member he never stopped promoting pro-people policies, even if this isolated him in parliament. They were the poorest candidate-couple, but they got a lot of sympathy. A number of Kupang’s residents contributed money of their own to support them. Up to two days before the elections leaflets condemning their affiliation with Muslim parties circulated, yet support remained undiminished.9

Adoe and his running mate thus garnered recognition as different and desirable candidates. Neither of them formed a part of the city’s political status quo: Adoe was constantly sidelined by the mayor and his cronies, and Hurek, because of his “pro-people policies,” was isolated from local parliament. They knew what it was like to be marginalized and therefore evoked sympathy. Even their association with Muslim parties did not deter voters. In fact, voters contributed money of their own to support them. Up to two days before the elections leaflets condemning their affiliation with Muslim parties circulated, yet support remained undiminished.

The results from the 2007 mayoral election in Kupang appeared to have replaced the exclusionary political care that had characterized New Order clientelism with a more inclusive form of political care in which, to refer to Nurul, the government would finally see all of society. When voters employ the language of corruption to signal a transgression of the political care they hoped to enjoy in a post-reformasi era, Salean’s reputation as a “corruption friend” did little to instill faith in voters that he would “see” and thus “take care of” them. In contrast, Adoe’s anti-corruption stance, along with his experience of not being seen by Kupang’s elitist political clique of collusionist cronies, offered voters hope that he would recognize those who felt similarly unseen. While in post-Mao China, as John Osburg (2018) describes in this issue of Current Anthropology, anti-corruption efforts effectively closed the field of alliance building to nonelite outsiders, in post-reformasi Kupang, the formerly tight-knit alliance between the party, bureaucracy, military, and business appeared to open up to those sidelined by it. But as the gubernatorial elections that were held the subsequent year showed, politicians’ attempts to see poor voters did not necessarily entail recognizing them as worthy political subjects.

Gubernatorial Elections of 2008: Empty Promises and Misrecognition

The 2007 mayoral elections served as a practice round and warning for the political parties and candidates who planned to participate in the 2008 gubernatorial elections. “The people” had moved from being passive recipients of state development and token supporters of the New Order regime to political subjects to be reckoned with. Candidates could not afford the nonrecognition that Salean had displayed. Just as voters like Nurul worried about being seen, so too did candidates and their campaign teams have to work on crafting images of self-recognition that they thought would appeal to voters. The main question that aspiring gubernatorial candidates grappled with in the aftermath of the 2007 elections, therefore, was how to do this.

Elite bureaucrats and politicians, who had learned their campaigning skills during Suharto’s New Order, had their own views on what voters desired. Rafael, the head of the provincial General Elections Committee, claimed that “ethnicity and also religion are important reasons to vote. What really matters is closeness (kedekatan).” Members of campaign teams, candidates, journalists, and university lecturers similarly asserted that voters in NTT chose candidates based on “emotional” reasons, by which they meant sharing kinship bonds, islands of origin, or religion. In spite of the election of anti-corruption candidate Adoe, the images of Kupangese as “still stupid” and “not yet ready” lingered on in campaign team’s election preparations. One strategy some candidates employed was to attempt to revive and reimagine mythologized “traditional” feudal kingdoms. All over post-reformasi Indonesia, descendants of former royal families joined district head elections, hoping that claims to some kind of traditional authority would get them votes. In Kupang, the Foenay family was attempting to do exactly this. During the Dutch colonial era, the Foenays held the royal title of sub-king (fetor) for the principality Foenay, which was a part of the larger united principality of Kupang. When I interviewed the family patriarch and matriarch a few times during 2007 and 2008, they expressed the hope that direct district head elections would enable them to reclaim some of their former glory. They made sure that members of the Foenay clan joined all available elections in the city and wider regency. Their son Eston Foenay participated in the 2008 gubernatorial elections for the position of deputy governor. They hoped his royal pedigree, combined with the family’s financial support, would prove successful. The Foenay family thus put a lot of money and effort into reimagining themselves in positions of traditional authority by drawing on their royal

roots. If they could recognize themselves as legitimate bearers of traditional authority, then surely voters would also recognize them as such and would cast their votes accordingly.

The perceived necessity of appealing to voters’ emotionality and need for closeness also came to the fore in the ethnic and religious composition of all candidate-couples who entered the elections. All couples vying for the positions of governor and deputy governor of NTT, a province with a Muslim minority (unusual in Indonesia), consisted of one Protestant and one Catholic candidate. All partnerships, additionally, consisted of candidates with roots in the bigger NTT islands with relatively large constituencies and sizeable diaspora in Kupang. In this attempt to appeal to voters, ethnic communities became imagined in radically novel ways that covered over the great internal strife and intraisland differences that, in fact, historically characterized ethnic and clan dynamics in NTT (Fox 1977; Hägerdal 2007; Schulte Nordholt 1971). This creation of imagined “ethnic” communities (Anderson 1983) on the basis of islands of origin thus seems to have little historical validity and to be a peculiarly modern strategy in NTT politics. Yet promises of ethnic and religious favoring, supposedly originating from candidates themselves but certainly concocted by the various campaign teams, spread like wildfire through text messages and gossip. One candidate, for example, promised to build schools and hospitals on the island of Rote if he were elected. Another promised to erect more churches on the island of Timor. All candidates promised to create more civil service positions in their islands of origin and to favor civil servants from their home regions in provincial civil service.

These attempts at fostering recognition via reimagined royal loyalties and feudal ties or religious and ethnic belonging fell flat among voters, as a handful of students from the local Undana University and I found out while conducting a series of surveys among prospective voters before, during, and after the 2008 gubernatorial elections. We specifically targeted market vendors, minibus drivers, motor taxi drivers, and housewives in low-income households or, in other words, the former depoliticized “floating mass” who had only recently gained the right to vote in these elections. The voters we talked to cared little for Eston Foenay’s invocation of his royal pedigree. Instead, since the Foenay family never held the royal rank of king (raja) but merely that of sub-king (fetor), it fueled a number of jokes regarding the Foenay’s inflated sense of self.10 Furthermore, not once in over a hundred interviews did anyone mention wanting more churches built in their regions of origin or hoping the new governor would favor members from their ethnic or religious group. This was not the kind of care or recognition they wanted. In response to questions of why they would vote, people invariably answered that they would do so because they were citizens (warga Negara) of NTT or Indonesia and had the right (hak) to elect the people’s representative. When asked what kind of changes they desired from the newly elected governor, people would list the kinds of socioeconomic improvements to their living standards expected of a liberal-democratic state, such as affordable education and health care, an increase in employment opportunities, a decrease in KKN, and infrastructural improvements. As in Nurul’s quote in the introduction to this article, people expressed these desires in terms of recognition and care. “The government should seriously pay attention to (memperhatikan) society,” said a young motorcycle taxi driver. “The governor must care about (peduli terhadap) the small people,” claimed a small shop employee.

This use of care pointed more to a desire for a liberal-democratic political covenant between voters and the political elite than to a clientelist relationality between political patrons and clients. Aaron Ansell (2018) describes how, in rural Brazil, poor Piauiense people, whose vote casting had previously been intertwined with embeddedness within the clientelist cliques surrounding local politicians, started to transfer their alliances to the nation-state after the implementation of the Bolsa Família program. Poor voters found the forms of care that this program delivered to be more reliable and trustworthy than the precarious forms of care provided by politicians who only valued them during the political seasons (Ansell 2018). This program, then, began to substitute a kind of liberal ethics for a clientelist one. Instead of viewing themselves as relational beings in a hierarchical social field, rural Piauienses started to conceive of themselves as rights-bearing individuals who could make claims on a welfare state. Poor voters in Kupang, like the Piauiense people Ansell discusses, were similarly eager to cast themselves as voting “possessive individuals” (Macpherson 1962; see also Ansell 2018) who deserve to be seen and cared about as citizens rather than treated as members of clientelist cliques or reimagined feudal, ethnic, or religious communities. Yet, before proclaiming a perhaps surprising IMF success story or triumph of neoliberal good governance, we should keep in mind what little attraction an ethics of clientelism had held for poor members of the electorate in rural Brazil and provincial urban Indonesia alike. Since they had already missed out on the possible rewards of clientelism by having little of value to offer politicians, “small people” risked little by letting go of shallowly imagined group-relative personhood and seeking recognition in novel ways instead.

At least somewhat aware of voters’ desire for change and of the appeal of the anti-corruption message that had carried Adoe to mayoral victory, all candidates also made different attempts to show “the people” that they saw them—that they cared about them—by making sweeping promises. Unlike promises of ethnic and religious favor passed on via the intangible media of text messages and rumors, these promises were made via the tan-

10. For example, one joke that circulated on cell phones portrayed Foenay as a hansip, an unpaid village security keeper. Such a security keeper has some government-given authority but receives no formal salary. Although a hansip might pretend to be a government official, he is generally considered, at best, an imitator of official authority. By comparing Foenay to a hansip, the joke reminds us that Foenay comes from a fetor (head of a principality) family, instead of a raja (royal) family. His claim to traditional authority based on his family’s former royal status is therefore nothing but an imitation of the real traditional authority held by rajas.
gible media of posters, banners, and campaign booklets. In the weeks leading up to the election, these promises materialized all over Kupang on posters stapled to trees and tape to walls and windows, on banners overhanging streets and alleyways, in “vision and mission” leaflets handed out during rallies and on the campaign trails, and in the newspapers that reported on the elections. One candidate, for instance, propagated free education for all, and he often mentioned his previous success in making education more affordable as a regency head of Kupang. Another candidate promised to use a larger share of the provincial budget to increase “the welfare of the NTT people.” A third outlined very sophisticated plans on how to improve public services. In addition, all candidate-couples gave the promise that their government would be clean (bersih), free from KKN (bebas dari KKN), and committed to the promotion of good governance. One candidate-couple stated in their “vision” that “government bureaucracy has to appear clean and authoritative with the paradigm of good and clear governance” and dedicated a special section to how to eradicate KKN. Another promoted a revision of the system of law and justice and the “development of a culture of law to a realization of a governance which is clean and free from KKN.” The fliers printed by the third stated that “our partnership is committed to cooperate with institutions of law and all elements of society to eradicate practices of corruption, collusion and nepotism (KKN) in all of NTT.”

Promises, however, offer but a flimsy form of recognizing voters as political subjects. Recalling Hegel’s insistence that mutual recognition is necessary for humans to become subjects, Joel Robbins (2003; 2009) reminds us that the exchange of material goods forms a fundamental part of achieving mutual recognition. The promises candidates made simply lacked substance. For example, since the central government and not the provincial government decides on increases in the number of civil servants, candidates could never make good on their promise to increase civil service in their islands of origin. Furthermore, most poor voters lack the educational or age requirements to qualify for even the lowest level of civil service. The offer of substanceless promises, consequently, did little to convince voters such as Nurul that candidates did care—did see them—and would follow through on their promises after the elections were over. A young male shop employee, for instance, said, “after candidates are chosen, all of a sudden they forget their promises from during the campaigns.” A female vegetable seller at the local market furthermore speculated, “Probably nothing will change. All candidates are just making promises.” The “small people” thus, overall, had little faith that the promises that candidates made would ever be substantiated. Promises were, as several people claimed, omong kosong (empty talk; more appropriately translated as “bullshit”). Instead of feeling as though they were finally “seen” or recognized, poor urban voters got the impression that they were misrecognized and not actually seen at all.

This impression was further supported by the single encounter vendors at a local market had with candidates. Lia, a very vocal middle-aged woman who was a vendor at the market, told me that one of the gubernatorial candidates had visited the market on the day before the elections. Even though all candidates and parties were officially supposed to have stopped campaigning, he tried to convince market vendors to vote for him while handing out IDR50,000 (about US$5) bills left and right. Lia happily took his money and promised him that she would vote for him, but she told me that his actions made her determined to vote for anybody but him. “Of course I would not vote for him. If he’s handing out money now, it means he will have to be extra greedy once he is governor.” She said this had been the first time a candidate had stopped by the market. Instead of coming to see society, to quote Nurul, and give some substance to empty campaign promises, this candidate tried to buy votes, thereby showing, in the bluntest way, his lack of interest in recognizing “the small people” as political subjects.

Poor urban voters were right in their skeptical stance towards candidates’ promises. Although candidates and parties had put on tantalusizing performances of being committed to good governance, anti-corruption, and political reform in mass demonstrations, heartening campaign speeches, vision and mission booklets, and on big banners, they failed to deliver. When the various campaign teams and local chapters of the political party PDI-P (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan, or Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle), whose candidate won the elections, met after their victory to discuss how to implement the various changes that they had promised, it turned out that the Provincial Government’s budget left no money to fund them. Campaigning costs, furthermore, had taken up all of PDI-P’s own financial resources. While their campaign had promised affordable education and a more transparent government, they had no financial means to fulfill these campaign promises. The promises of both liberal and clientelist ethics turned out to be omong kosong, or empty talk. What the gubernatorial elections showed voters was that, even in an era of direct district head elections and even after the election of a mayor who ran on an anti-corruption platform, they were still not seen, and their desires were still not cared about. Care was a shallow performance that lacked substance, and recognition was a mere farce.

Mayoral Elections of 2012: The Return of the Bapak

Any post-reformasi hopes voters might have still had of finally being seen and cared for were further crushed when the anti-corruption mayor failed to deliver on his anti-corruption promise. Dan Adoe had proven to be less of a break with the collusion and nepotism of his predecessor than people had hoped for. Employees at the Department of Public Works complained about promotions he had given out in the wake of his victory: not only had he continued the practice of “answering favors” (balas jasa) to loyal supporters, which he had opposed in his campaign, but he had also appointed a complete incompetent to the position of department head. Civil servants claimed that Adoe also helped out family members with favors, money, and positions. He furthermore had failed to “answer favors” to his
Muslim coalition partners, leaving important positions in upper-level bureaucracy unfilled. Not only did he not embody the change people had hoped for, he was also an unconvincing leader. Adoe’s indecisiveness about filling crucial positions made some civil servants long for a “real Bapak” with the necessary ruthlessness and authority to settle the mess that was Kupang’s city-level bureaucracy. Although Kupangese seemed fed up with Bapaks when they voted for Adoe, his lack of Bapakist skills were now cause for complaints. Adoe’s final fall from grace occurred a few years after the end of his mayoral reign, when he was arrested and sentenced to prison on corruption charges in 2014. The former “clean” candidate had become the subject of Kupang’s highest-profile corruption case to date.

Adoe’s former opponent Salean, meanwhile, recovered nicely from his 2007 mayoral defeat. Immediately after the 2007 elections, Adoe relegated Salean to an “expert staff” position, which effectively excluded him from all city-level civil service activities. After the gubernatorial elections, however, the newly elected governor transferred him to a provincial civil service position, thus offering him a chance to join governmental decision-making processes again and to rebuild his reputation. By the time the new mayoral elections came around in 2012, it was clear just how successful his rehabilitation had been: the people of Kupang chose him as their second-ever directly elected mayor. Knowing Salean for “who he was” had counted against him during the 2007 mayoral elections, whereas in 2012 he may have won because of this. As the Piauienses say, he “steals but gets things done” (Ansell 2018:S128).

For those who have their hopes of political progress fastened on the teleological progress narrative of good governance, in which clientelism will give way to democracy, the election of New Order standard bearer and known “corruption friend” Salean only underscores the view that Indonesian democracy is still “in transition.” His election also supports the nagging suspicions of geographical disparity that Kupangese sometimes entertain when they state that they are “not yet developed” in comparison with an “already developed” West. Yet, for those who consider political progress in terms of crafting a kind of political care that is founded in recognition—in feeling as though one is seen—Kupangese do not appear to be all that different from similarly positioned citizens in so-called Western democracies, where we could similarly frame the contemporary appeal of leftist or rightist reformers in terms of voters’ desire to be seen in contexts in which political care seems to be lacking. Furthermore, just as voters in provincial urban Kupang or rural Brazil are willing to put up with a candidate who steals but gets things done, it is increasingly apparent that voters elsewhere are similarly willing to accept a certain degree of corruption, collusion, or nepotism as long as they feel seen and thus cared for.

Conclusion

In this article, I have described three consecutive rounds of direct district head elections in Kupang in order to assess how the “small people” and elite politicians navigated the change in electoral relationship instigated by the implementation of direct district head elections. The implementation of such elections formed a part of wider administrative and political efforts to end the corruption that had become so endemic to President Suharto’s New Order regime, promote good governance, and stimulate Indonesia’s democratization process. Framing Kupang’s first district head elections as a tale of two mayors, I traced how voters’ initial enthusiastic reception of an anti-corruption mayor in 2007 eventually made way for the election of a known corruptor in 2012.

When read as a victory of corruption, this tale echoes the general disappointment voiced by scholars of Indonesian politics and by Kupangese themselves who view the persistence of corruption and clientelism in aftermath of post-reformasi anti-corruption efforts and other good governance reforms as a sign of failure to transition to a “meaningful” or “liberal” democracy. Yet, weary of the progress narrative and moralizing undercurrent of good governance, I suggest we take the perspective of Nurul and other poor urban voters like her, who view political progress in relational terms as a form of care, founded in politicians’ recognition of them as political subjects. To them, corruption signals a transgression of political care, stemming from an unwillingness to see the “small people.” Thus, eschewing a view of corruption as a diagnosis for a failure to democratize, such a relational view of corruption displays complex post-reformasi processes of recrafting relationships of care and recognition between the “small people” and political elites that seem eerily familiar to “Western” readers. The processes in which voters’ desire for recognition and care are matched by politicians’ empty promises, misrecognition, and nonrecognition suggest, not a “still stupid” counter to an “already there” geographical or temporal elsewhere, but a familiar political business-as-usual, as found throughout liberal democracies.

While post-reformasi anti-corruption measures did not quite bring the democracy, good governance, and end to corruption that its proponents hoped, it did give the “small people” the opportunity to vote for their district head every 5 years. Even though they elected a known corruptor to the position of mayor, they have voted out unsatisfactory district heads. They did it with Salean in 2007 and with Adoe in 2012. Even if Salean continues the Bapakist ways he so values, he needs to take voters’ concerns at least somewhat seriously. As the former aide-de-camp to Mayor Dan Adoe said, “People are getting smarter and smarter when it comes to politics and voting. When a president, or governor, or mayor is in power now, they have to work sincerely and successfully. If they fail, they won’t get elected again.” Put differently, the political elite can no longer afford to dismiss voters as “still stupid” but, instead, need to put in some effort to “see all of society.” Instead of finding hope for “good” governance in the teleological temporality of the progress narrative of development, we might, instead, appreciate the rhythmic temporality of regular election cycles. Knowing one can vote for a new mayor, governor, or president at regular intervals is perhaps the most comforting source of hope for political progress many of us currently have.
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Clientelism, Elections, and the Dialectic of Numerical People in Northeast Brazil

by Aaron Ansell

This paper explores rural Brazilians’ interpretations of and ethical reflections on political clientelism. Brazilian elites often regard the people of the dry hinterland (sertanejos) as lazy, politically apathetic, and prone to corrupting democratic elections through the sale of their votes. Here I argue that the sertanejos living in the northeastern state of Piauí practice a form of clientelism that entails an ethical distinction between degraded vote buying and morally upright electoral transactions with politicians. For the sertanejos of Piauí’s interior, ethical electoral transactions do not corrupt democratic elections; they reverse the moral damage that elections themselves cause. Elections refigure socially embedded persons as numerical individuals destined to be added together as equal quanta of generic value. Ethical transactions reconstitute the voter’s socially embedded personhood after the election has passed. However, rather than vindicating clientelism, this analysis draws attention to the social inequalities that prevent some people from practicing the ethical forms of political exchange. It therefore builds toward a standpoint for critiquing political clientelism that does not reproduce liberal idealizations of democratic citizenship.

In 2016, right-wing demonstrators throughout Brazil’s metropolitan areas accused center-left President Dilma Rousseff of corruption, lending their support to her impeachment later that year. Far from the big cities, the subsistence cultivators and townspeople living in the dry backlands (sertão) of Piauí State anxiously attended to the media coverage of these impeachment proceedings. Few sertanejos doubted that “Dilma” had indeed engaged in illegal “accounting techniques involving loans from public banks to the treasury that artificially enhanced the budget surplus” (Gallas 2016). But perhaps even fewer cared. Dilma’s Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores [PT]) administration and that of her predecessor (President Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva) had brought electricity and potable water to the villages where some 80% of the sertanejo population lived. They had facilitated poor people’s access to small low-interest loans, expanded health services, and introduced a conditional cash transfer policy (Bolsa Família) that ameliorated both poverty and inequality.

Still, many people aligned with Brazil’s increasingly powerful right-wing regard poor people’s support for the PT as a sign of their tolerance of corruption, an attitude captured by the popular phrase rouba mas faz (“steals but gets things done”). For some critics, sertanejos’ tolerance of Dilma’s “corruption” confirms pejorative stereotypes of the region’s population. The figure of the sertanejo is often cast as a backward hick who lacks political judgment, whose very language, the “mulatto, stony, near-unintelligible Portuguese of the scrublands,” is inadequate to the communicative tasks of modernity, as discussed by Muniz de Albuquerque (2014 [1999]:130). Relatedly, the current Temer administration justifies its intended cuts to Bolsa Família by claiming that such policies amount to “institutionalized vote-buying” (Campos 2016). In short, conservatives characterize sertanejos as a party to corruption insofar as they sell their votes both to embezzling politicians who buy them off with food (or other material goods) and to “corrupt communist” presidents like Lula and Dilma who buy them off with redistributive cash stipends. Indeed, the caricature of the poor, lazy, dark-skinned, and overly fecund sertanejo combines the worst stereotypes of the US “welfare queen” with the added element of political soul selling.

Dilma’s impeachment, pejorative stereotypes of the sertanejo, and the allegations of Bolsa Família’s corruption frame

Aaron Ansell is Associate Professor in the Department of Religion and Culture at Virginia Tech (242 Lane Hall [0227], Blacksburg, Virginia 24061, USA [aansell@vt.edu]). This paper was submitted 6 IV 17, accepted 1 XI 17, and electronically published 13 III 18.

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2. For a discussion of the so-called rouba mas faz mentality in relation to the PT corruption scandals, see Balán 2014.

3. I know of no evidence supporting the accusation that Bolsa Família obliges the poorest to vote for PT candidates. Studies of Bolsa Família’s beneficiary selection process have concluded the contrary, i.e., that it “did not include any partisan or territorial criteria” (Fenwick 2013:76).

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the foregoing analysis, but they are not its focus. Rather, what follows is an account of those electoral transactions that many statespersons (conservative and progressive alike) are prone to dismiss as vote buying. Scholars often label such transactions “political clientelism,” the “exchange of political rights for social benefits” (Fox 1997:393). Here I explore the local political ethics governing such transactions in rural Piauí State, where I have conducted about 25 months of ethnographic research since 2003. While social scientists often distinguish clientelism from outright corruption (e.g., Hetherington 2018; Nugent 2018), which is commonly defined as “the appropriation of public resources for private gain” (Fukayama 2014:83), the distinction often collapses in practice. For instance, scholars and policymakers committed to normative (liberal) democracy readily describe clientelist exchanges as those in which the poor “are bribed into not pressing their material interests on their representatives who shape public policy” (Stokes et al. 2013:248). When considering why a voter would accept such a “bribe,” such scholars point to “the greater marginal utility of income among poorer voters” (Stokes et al. 2013:89). This claim suggests that these voters know better but their desperation outweighs their political ethics. This approach risks projecting a liberal ethics onto these voters that obscures how they may well be acting within an alternative ethical framework, one that need not be predicated on the distinction between public and private resources.

The sertanejos living in southeast Piauí certainly understand the modern distinction between public and private spheres of activity, but that distinction does not necessarily organize their voting ethics. The sertanejos I have come to know have long exchanged their votes for many kinds of material goods, and they regard only a subset of such exchanges to be ethically reprehensible—that is, “corrupt” (although they only occasionally use the term corrupto in reference to the degraded exchanges). They have traditionally considered other political transactions (equally as “clientelistic” by liberal standards) to be morally upright. Here I argue that this local distinction is shaped by the institutional mechanics of modern elections (mainly municipal elections), which deform the voter’s self in a way that requires repressive action. Moral political transactions serve that purpose.

Modern elections with universal suffrage and one vote allocated per person rest on the principle of methodological individualism. This principle derives the social whole from its individual parts. The election encourages voters to see themselves as individual parts, each voter formally equal to the other and able to steer himself or herself within a social space in which none is anchored within any hierarchy or network of obligation. Here I draw on Roberto DaMatta’s (Dumontian) distinction between the “person,” as a relational being “complementary to all others” and “submerged within a totality to which it is necessarily bound,” and the “individual,” who is “equal and parallel to all others” with “private” (or inner) emotions and a “right to its own space” (DaMatta 1991:170–177). The dominant construction of the self in Piauí’s sertão combines elements of both ideal types. Certainly, people talk about individual character and attribute a (Christian) spiritual equality to all people. At the same time, they reckon their relations to others in terms of their relations to those people’s family groups, attributing other’s character traits, privilege, and culpability to families (and villages), and they proudly express their own dependence on prestigious persons, as if to partake of the latter’s honorable identities. Despite this complexity, I submit that the dominant idiom of the sertanejo self is that of the person.

In this context, an election reduces sertanejo persons to numerical individuals, each endowed with, and in fact equated with, a single quantum of generic value. This value makes the voter’s self into something “destined to be counted,” like notches on a politician’s bedpost (Châtelat 2013:36). To identify one’s self with this quantum of value is to experience the social field as a staged “Galilean thought experiment,” as epistemologist Gilles Châtelat calls it, one that works by first “stripping bodies of their qualities” and then by deriving truth from the movement of these human particles within “an infinite space purified of all forces, of all friction” (Châtelat 2013:36). The deper-

4. Several studies do posit mutual causation between clientelism and corruption in a way that affirms their conceptual distinction (e.g., Kawata 2006; Singer 2009).

5. During my visits to Piauí’s sertão in the decade following the establishment of Bolsa Família and other PT policies, I have increasingly heard my sertanejo associates use the phrase “we are no longer stupid” to critique the very ethical distinction that I have discussed throughout this essay (see Sharma 2018 and Tidye 2018). Such claims suggest that an incipient liberal electoral ethics may be replacing that which I have described here, although it is also possible that transformations in political ethics are occurring that are not reducible to “liberalization.”

6. There is nothing novel about the claim that clientelist relations include an internal ethical component, but because those relations are often positioned outside modernity, the nature of clientelist ethics is easily misconstrued. Michael Herzfeld (1987), Ana Claudia Marques (1999), and others have argued that the term “patron-client relations” has been historically applied to Mediterranean societies in ways that exaggerate certain facets of these societies, such as honor and shame, while backgrounding others. Clientelism’s stereotypical opposition to modernity leads some scholars to frame its ethical aspects as preculural human features, “rooted in . . . basic biological principles [by which a person] instinctively tends to favor relatives” (Fukayama 2014:88). Alternatively, scholars who discuss clientelist ethics in cultural (rather than biological) terms often focus on features familiar to the Weberian ideal type of a patrimonial society, such as loyalty (Boissevain 1977:81; Gellner 1977:2), obedience (Gellner 1977:2), interpersonal trust (Roniger 1991), family (Banfield 1958), honor (Gellner 1977:2), and pious intercession (Boissevain 1977; Rassam 1977:159). Modern clientelism morality, however, is less a patrimonial holdover and more “an addendum” to other “official modes of organization” (Gellner 1977:3; Landé 1977). Scholars of clientelist ethics should therefore view clientelist practices as corrective supplements to the dislocations of such official modes of organization, here explored in terms of elections.
sonalizing dynamics of elections dissolve hierarchical groups (e.g., extended families) into monadic particles that can then be reassembled as aggregates of individuals who are added together to produce “our side” and “their side” (i.e., the official multiparty coalitions that arise during the campaign season). Because they experience this dissolution as a deformation of their personhood (albeit one with which they are complicit), sertanejos hold their politicians accountable for reaffirming their socially embedded identities in the aftermath of an election.

What makes this dissolution of the voting person reversible is something akin to what Brazilian literary critic Roberto Schwarz calls “favour,” the gift that a “man of wealth and power” gives to a “free man” who, prototypically, is his “agregado,” that is, one who is annexed to his family (Schwarz 1992:22). Here I use “favour” (preserving the British spelling of Schwarz’s English translation) to refer to those sertanejo political gifts that entail a similar act of encompassment, one that affirms the recipient’s personal prestige and the prestige of his or her particular family through the idioms of long-term care and friendship. Understanding the internal ethics of “political clientelism” in these terms militates against any dismissal of clientelist subjects as morally dissociated as well as any tendency to plot this subject’s teleological transformation into a liberal citizen.

Here I do not seek to venerate “political clientelism” as a political form; rather, I illuminate clientelism’s “quasi-universal social mediation” (Schwarz 1992:22). Such quasi universality can be seen in the local aspiration for unalienated exchange, for a part of the voter’s selfhood to remain attached to his or her vote, so as to ensure that the voter is not permanently transformed into an instrument of another’s advancement. This impulse is formally (although not substantively) similar to the liberal ethic that condemns the clientelist alienation of those “votes that are purchased [and that therefore] carry little information about the preferences of the person who sold them” (Stokes et al. 2013:253). Moreover, sertanejo political ethics militates against the permanent reduction of persons to numerically instrumented selves and thereby manifests a version of Kant’s categorical imperative, that people not treat one another as means to ends. Yet for all this, the local distinction between moral and degraded electoral transactions mystifies the fact that not all sertanejos enjoy equal access to the morally upright transactional forms. Social marginality based on wealth, gender, race, and kinship inhibits such access. Here I turn a critical eye toward these inequalities and explain their relevance for current debates about antipoverty policy.

First, I sketch a history of Brazilian elections in terms of the conceptual issues introduced here. Then, I turn to southeast Piauí to focus on local distinctions between two types of electoral transaction. I analyze these two transaction types in terms of their ability (or failure) to restore numerical individuals to their preelection condition of prestigious personhood. I work through a case study that shows how social inequality produces differential access to these transactional options as well as how inability to access moral, long-term transactions can exacerbate a person’s social marginality in the long term. In my concluding remarks, I reflect on the implications of this analysis for current debates about Brazilian antipoverty policy.

**Elections, People, and Individuals**

After Brazil’s independence from Portugal in 1822, the parliamentary elite who ruled the Brazilian Empire (1822–1889) from Rio de Janeiro established a new system of indirect elections (for parliament as well as local positions) that reflected their ambivalent adoption of European liberal ideals. Formal political equality, even limited to free and propertied men, conflicted not with the hidden reality of social hierarchy (as it did in Western Europe) but with the blatant appearance of hierarchy in everyday life (Schwarz 1992:23). Twentieth-century thinkers argued that the hierarchical sociability of Brazilian life derived from the colonial plantation, where the seigniorial patriarchs of large rural estates ruled over an attaché of dependent children, slaves, and free dependents (agregados). Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda, in his seminal work The Roots of Brazil, summarizes: “The private sphere invaded the public, the family invaded the state” (2012 [1936]:53). The seigniorial patriarch functioned as the stand-in for the colonial (and later imperial) state, dispensing justice and government resources to his dependents with full discretion. The patriarch’s dependents (even free persons) were not treated as discrete individuals but rather as extensions of the patriarch who “bore responsibility for the actions of those whom he led” (Graham 1990:22; and see Holston 2008).

This deeply hierarchical form of sociability was hard to reconcile with basic electoral procedures, even though the latter had been quite limited. During the “Second Empire” (1840–1888), liberal elites in the capital generally promoted the cancellation of literacy requirements for voters and the consequent expansion of suffrage to all men (which occurred in 1881; Porto 2002:100–107). Yet they, like their conservative counterparts, feared this measure would turn the “unknown multitudes” into “blind instruments—either of individual passions or of the authorities,” a worry exacerbated by the perceived inevitability of abolition (which occurred in 1889; Graham 1990:190). Liberals and conservatives in the capital shared the concern that enfranchising “the rabble” would deliver them into the hands of the wealthy rural aristocrats to whom they were beholden in daily life. The agrarian elite would “bride” these dependents and “corral” them into voting blocs that they would use to secure regional autonomy from the central government (Nunes Leal 1977 [1949]:21). The central government therefore took various steps to minimize this “bridled vote,” such as limiting suffrage to men who lived outside their fathers’ houses and whose occupations made them independent of paternal control (Graham 1990:103, 105).

7. See Graham 1990:103.
Underlying elite concerns about the centrifugal pull of regional land bosses was the more general impulse to protect the social fabric itself from the destabilizing potential of the vote. The perceived threat of the vote was not so much that the popular classes would affect revolution through the ballot. (The candidates were often ideologically indistinguishable, and anyway, the elections’ outcomes were often rigged.) Rather, their very possession of the right to vote jeopardized a social order predicated on hierarchy. Thus, elites at local levels enacted a host of supplemental electoral rituals that dramatized each voter’s position with respect to local elites, such as the requirement of elite witnesses to testify to the trustworthiness of poor voters (Graham 1990:112). Framed by such practices, electoral “participation served not to manifest an egalitarian ideology, but to ensure that some would be called upon to play bit parts while others of higher standing stood in the spotlight” (Graham 1990:120—121; and see Holston 2008 on other legalized inequalities). These rituals militated against the election’s potential to decompose hierarchical groups into aggregates of relationally unfixed individuals corralled by “local bosses . . . leading swarms of electors as one drives a herd of donkeys” (Nunes Leal 1977 [1949]:16).

During the twentieth century, changes to the law brought electoral institutions more in line with liberal thought. Ironically, Brazil’s authoritarian regimes affected some of these changes. Under Getúlio Vargas (who later would assume dictatorial powers), suffrage was extended to women and the vote of all enfranchised persons was made compulsory and secret (Holston 2008:105; Silva and Silva 2015). Later, during the military dictatorship (1964–1985), the Electoral Code made it “unacceptable . . . to give, offer, promote, solicit or receive for oneself, or another, money, gifts or other advantage to obtain a vote” (Tribunal Superior Eleitoral Brasileiro 2016, Art. 299).

During democratization, the literacy requirement was removed (1985) and multiparty competition allowed (1979). In Piauí, this coincided with increased competition among politicians and an increased choice of alliances for the rural poor.

Today, in Brazil’s small rural municipalities, ordinary people lament the factional rancor that penetrates everyday life every 2 years during the “political season” (época da política), the phase of intensified coalition building that begins a few months before the onset of the official campaign season (July) and continues through the October election day.8 Municipalities bifurcate into two warring factions, each of them aligned with a candidate for mayor and his or her associated legislative candidates (vereadores). During this phase, “politics” is “above all conceived as an activity, which . . . has an invasive character . . . and penetrates relations and domains from which it should be excluded (kinship, art, religion)” (Goldman 2013:90—91, emphasis in original). I understand this “invasive character,” as anthropologist Marcio Goldman calls it, to derive not only from the penetration of one’s intimate group by factional concerns but also from the reconfiguration of one’s group as an aggregate of individuals, each of whom can “go where I please” (as Piauienses say)—that is, choose whom to vote for and, crucially, whether to “follow” another (e.g., a parent, a spouse, or a local community organizer) in one’s vote. This is perhaps why anthropologist Moacir Palmeira insists that “for the [rural Brazilian] elector, what’s in play in an election isn’t the choosing of one’s representatives, but the situating of one’s self within society” (1992:27). What Palmeira calls the “adherence vote” (voto de adesão) rightly presupposes a subject who has already been desituated from society, who moves around like a free particle. I suggest that we can discern two modes of self-situating that both operate during the election cycle: one is the aggregation of (particalized) individuals under the banner of a candidate, and the other is the postelection resituation of one’s self as a person within family-based hierarchies.

In the next section, I try to illustrate the way elections promote an experience of the self as a countable individual and how they later help certain people reestablish prestigious forms of socially embedded personhood. I discuss two modes of (clientelist) electoral transaction that strike Piauienses as morally distinct because they affirm voters’ postelectoral personhood to different degrees.

Moral Reasoning and Modalities of Electoral Transaction

During the political season, sertanejos often lament to one another the “tearing apart” of friendships and neighborly relations due to factional adversity. They blame the “fanatics” among them, those who are “sick” (doente) for their chosen politician, who scream and pick fights with adversaries. Many claim to keep away from the loud noises of the campaign and from self-seeking politicians who reduce their value to their vote. “You think they’re smiling at you, but they’re smiling at your vote,” as one woman said. Yet this experience of objectification also has its allure.

A telling incident occurred in May of 2004, during “the politics.” It involved a gay man who was the municipal nurse and the only person I knew who was “out” in this generally antigay setting. The nurse, who was accustomed to daily jokes and low-grade sexual assaults, became the victim of some nasty political bullying when he told the mayor that he was uncertain “who will have my vote this year.” The mayor’s son-in-law, upon hearing the remark, slapped him across the face, saying, “You’ll vote for your mayor, faggot (viado)!” Such acts of physical aggression are rare but not unheard of during the political period, when “things get hot.” Still shaken, the nurse later vented to me, “I have my defect, but I’m a citizen. I have a right to my own vote. I go where I please!” Sometime later, I saw him carousing with other men in a bar owned by the son of the opposition candidate, “Henrique.” It seemed to me that the men in the bar (mostly Henrique’s followers) were treating the nurse rather well: one clapped him on the back, and

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8. Elections, and thus “political periods,” occur every 2 years due to staggered, 4-year municipal and state/federal cycles, although the local processes in question here are more acute during the municipal elections.
another filled his glass with beer. The town prostitute (the nurse’s friend) was also there, sitting on one man’s lap, then another’s . . . then the nurse’s. One man approached the chair from behind, grabbed the nurse’s hands, and squeezed the woman’s breasts with them while laughing, an act that I construed as a playful (if assaultive) form of “straightening” the nurse. When Henrique won the election for mayor that year, the nurse went on to act as an important player in his extra-legal health care network. One of Henrique’s allies later said of him, “He has his defect, but he knows how to care for others.”

I do not know what, if any, material good Henrique gave the nurse in exchange for his vote that year. Regardless, once the nurse promised his vote to Henrique (or made overtures to that effect), he was swept up into egalitarian and quasi-anonymous Rabelaisian festivities. By “quasi-anonymous,” I just mean that, while everybody knew him (and his stigmatized sexuality), they playfully erased his particular identity so that the nurse could become just one of the guys, one of Henrique’s voters. The nurse’s “conversion” into a vote-seeking individual suspended his subaltern personhood and issued him an anonymous freedom to “go where I please.” It was the nurse’s freedom of movement that made him available to affiliate with Henrique’s faction, to allow Henrique to enclose him in his “corral” (curral). Moreover, afterward, Henrique’s “favour” helped to redeem his social specificity by placing his professional identity under the aegis of Henrique’s postelectoral hierarchy.

The festive events that candidates sponsor during the political period are occasions when people like the nurse can partake in such playful suspensions of identity. Both within and outside of these festive occasions, the head candidate’s supporters make use of an absolutist moral discourse that equates all those on “our side” with “the people” (o povo) and depicts those on “their side” as the perfidious few (a boca preta, literally “the black mouths”) who profit at the people’s expense. One unofficial slogan that circulated in 2004 went, “If God is for us, who would be against us?” The slogan is, among other things, depersonalizing; it links the voter’s virtue as a generic Christian (Catholic or Evangelical Protestant) to her generic membership within a politician’s faction, as is common throughout Northeast Brazil (Maya Mayblin, personal communication, July 2017).

Not all talk during “the politics” erases people’s social specificity. In everyday talk during the campaign (often occurring in small bars or on the front porches of private homes), people recount personal misfortunes that they attribute to the wrongdoing of rival candidates. Members of the same faction elicit and circulate one another’s accusatory narratives so as to specify the stakes of the election to particular persons and families. At the same time, however, when various person’s stories are relayed in the same conversation, speakers calibrate their plots, making their protagonists analogues for one another. The circulation of personal stories becomes another means to fold particular people into aggregates of individuals associated through political allegiance.

This shift from the particular to the generic expression of the voter’s selfhood also plays out within a genre of private negotiations between candidates and families. During the early months of “the politics,” politicians visit the homes of prospective voters to present them with “proposals.” Typically, the candidate knocks on the door, is invited in to enjoy the family’s hospitality, and then asks, “What do you need here?” What follows is a sequential revelation of reciprocal need, the politician’s need for votes and other campaigning support and the voter’s need for farm inputs and household repairs. What follows is a sequence of patron-client bargaining (Ansell 2014; Marques and Villela 2016). This genre of bargaining, which dates back to at least the mid-twentieth century, has traditionally culminated in the posting of a generic sign on the door or outer walls of the home, the candidate’s propaganda sticker. The household head may post multiple copies of this sticker to the exterior of their home, a quantity correspondent to the number of household votes promised to the candidate.

Male household heads have traditionally expected wives, children, and other coresident dependents (e.g., junior siblings) to “follow father in the vote out of respect.” By the time my fieldwork began, this expectation was fading. Yet, many families still vote in unison for strategic reasons. The sum of the votes that a family head (man or woman) can dedicate to a politician determines their leverage in negotiating politicians’ favours, both those that the politician promises before the election (e.g., a sack of cement or a municipal job to a family member) and those favours that a voter might solicit during an unforeseen emergency after the election (see below). The fact that some dependent junior kin cannot easily “go where I please” does not inherently trouble the claim that social relations during the political period approximate Châtelier’s “Galilean thought experiment.” Instead, it reveals the logic of a numerical game based on “capturing” (captar) or “conquering” (conquistar) votes. Politics, for candidates and family heads, entails the immobilization of individuals, the art of locking others into commitments and then making those commitments publicly visible and countable. Posted on a household’s outer wall, a candidate’s propaganda stickers indicate that the household is “fechado” (locked in, literally “closed”) for such-and-such a politician. The same can be done at a higher level of aggregation. Often, contiguous groups of five or 10 households within a village will bear identical adhesive propaganda. These are often the multifamily aggregates that a village leader (a church deacon, community association president, or wealthy neighbor) has “locked in” on a candidate’s behalf (see Palmeira

9. My field consultants have noted a decline in this practice since the early 2000s. Elsewhere (Ansell 2013), I have tried to explain its decline in terms of the public’s increasing internalization of liberal critiques of patron bullying as well as a more endogenous grievance that blames this propaganda for limiting local modes of agency.

10. Minors at least 16 years old can vote in Brazil, although their vote is not mandatory, as it is with other adults. See Heredia 1996 for a discussion of voting and family gender dynamics in the rural northeast.
1992 on “electors with multiple votes”). When these prestigious villagers attend festive events during “the politics,” they make a show of how many electors they have “captured” by ushering them into open-air passenger trucks and transporting them to the events. As these trucks arrive, politicians count their occupants before they disembark. The sum serves as a numerical gauge of the local leader’s prestige and determines the amount of resources the politician will invest in these informal leaders (see Szwarcberg 2015:76 on “brokers”).

Candidates may or may not negotiate specific exchanges in the homes of those individuals already “captured” by local leaders. Even if they do not, these electors trust that their candidates will be reliable sources of support during times of need (see Roniger 1991 on “trust” in Northeast Brazil). The idiom of “friendship” (amizade) establishes this norm (Alencar Chaves 2003:43–53). When I asked Henrique why, after the election was over, he provided emergency bus fare to transport a sick person to an urban hospital, he said, “I’m always a friend to my friend.” His “always” resonates with other temporally sensitive expressions of friendship. A good politician is one “for all seasons” (de todos os tempos) and one who “always walks around here” (sempre anda por aqui). A bad politician is one who “only wants your vote” and “only gives you value (valor) during the political period.” While politicians may boast of the enduring loyalties they have earned from village families who vote for them in sequential elections, they know that they need to do their part to secure these loyalties against the shifting sands of familial and neighborhood obligations (e.g., work partnerships, love affairs, and land disputes) that alter people’s thinking about whom to vote for during the next election. Each subsequent “proposal” visit implicitly affirms that a voter who was once captured in their numerical individuality has returned to live as a socially embedded person whose particularity awaits rediscovery.

But politicians do not always do that. They view some voters as unworthy of such affirmation because they are embedded as marginals vis-à-vis their local community. Such people’s votes are simply “bought.”

In contrast to the morally upright variety of electoral transaction described above, Piauienses regard as “corrupt” (corrupto) or “shameless” (sem vergonha) the purchase of individual votes with cash, what they call “vote buying” (compra de voto).11 Individuals who “sell” their votes are reputed to attend any and all campaign festivities, feigning commitment to whichever candidate sponsors these events. Some of my neighbors in Piauí’s villages admitted to doing as much, but they insisted that they simply had yet to make up their minds about their voting intentions. Politicians try to court the votes of such persons, but they complain that many are untrustworthy. They call them “tricksters” (enrolões) or “broken-down people” (desman-
telados), although it seemed to me that many self-respecting persons did not receive candidate visits in their homes. To me it seemed less a matter of personal character and more a function of less prestigious people’s inability “to furnish votes for the politicians, either because they do not maintain control over their own resource-as-votes . . . or because, for whatever reason, they fail to convince candidates of this control, or of their exclusive loyalty” (Villela and Marques 2006:36).

Instead of visiting such people in their homes with a “proposal” during the campaign, candidates (or their associates) try to capture their votes the night before the elections. They stuff themselves with bills and ride their motorcycles into poor communities, arriving discretely by the back roads. They offer these “broken down people” the going rate for a vote in the upcoming election (US$20 in 2004, increasing to US$100 in 2012). By making this deal, the voter gives no further commitment, promising neither to display the candidate’s propaganda nor to vote for him or her in subsequent elections. And the politician makes no commitment to serve as an available font of the sort of postelectoral gifts that affirm the voter’s prestigious positioning within village-level hierarchies—indeed, they often “don’t even say hello” to such voters following the election.

Piauienses typically associate gifts of cash and booze, as opposed to jobs and farm inputs, with degraded political exchange. As one villager commented, “It looks ugly, a man taking cash. I’ve taken cash, but it’s not right. Henrique should know we value his heart, not just his wallet.” Yet it is not the use of cash per se that sullies these transactions; giving a voter cash earmarked for a medical procedure carries no stigma. However, when cash “is presented in its purely monetary form, it turns instantaneous and finite a relation (elector/candidate) whose elongated duration . . . is many times more valuable” (Villela 2005:269, my translation). Here anthropologist Jorge Villela frames vote buying (in the neighboring state of Pernambuco) as a truncation of social relations otherwise expected to last for an “elongated duration.” His insight extends to Piauienses, for whom a moral vote is one that retains some part of the voter’s self—a vote that serves for the politician as a durable index to the voter’s personhood and motivates postelectoral favours. By contrast, in what Piauienses call “vote buying,” the politician carries away a vote that exerts no force pulling him back toward an ongoing reciprocity with the voter as a socially embedded person.

In this section, I have tried to answer a question posed by political scientists: “Within the broad category of clientelist exchanges . . . what affects the types of benefits that voters demand, or that politicians choose to supply?” (Hicken 2011: 305). The salient distinction I have presented does not revolve around the familiar liberal binary: private bribes versus “programmatic club goods . . . distributed according to well-defined rules and without regard to partisan characteristics or voting history” (Hicken 2011:294). Rather, this local moral distinction opposes short- and long-term exchanges involving private (and sometimes public) goods. This distinction is familiar to anthropologists who have found that people in various cultural
settings ascribe legitimacy to long-term "transaction orders" associated with the maintenance of the cosmos and deny legitimacy to short-term transactions associated with individual self-interest (Bloch and Perry 1989; see also Elyachar 2005; Ferguson 1994; Munn 1992). Here it is enough to note that honorable completion of these long-term transactions affirms the voter’s value as a socially embedded person whose prestige motivates ongoing friendship and favour with a politician. The axiom that would seem to guide moral electoral conduct in this clientelist system might be expressed as “People who become numbers for one another should turn back into people for one another” (cf. Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative as the need to treat people as ends in themselves; Kant 2002 [1785]). Yet this ethic is not fully universal; it extends only to a politician’s own voters. Indeed, these are the people she or he uses as numbers in the first place.

This account of clientelist ethics in Piauí’s sertão highlights ordinary people’s preoccupation with the preservation of their prestigious embeddedness within everyday hierarchies in the aftermath of elections. But it also suggests a certain mystification of electoral transactions insofar as people blame voters’ bad character (“tricksters” and “broken-down people”) for their “choice” to engage in degraded transactions. In the next section, I explore how social inequalities at the village level impede access to honorable political transactions.

Unequal Access to Moral Transactions

When I first went to live in the remote Afro-Brazilian village of Caixa de Água in early 2004, the “white” people from the municipal hub teased me that I would come running back of Caixa de Água in early 2004, the When I reported having long-term alliances with the erstwhile mayor (Henrique’s rival) nor with any of the mayors who preceded him. He “has not stepped in our village in years,” several told me. “He just sends his ass-kissers (puxa-sacos) to buy our votes.” Others lamented their abandonment: “We only have value (tem valor) during the political season.” Several reported the mayor to have said of the village residents, “If you set fire to them all, the only thing [worthwhile] you would lose would be the match.”

In this section, I take another pass at Allen Hicken’s question, “What affects the types of benefits that voters demand, or that politicians choose to supply?” (Hicken 2011:305). While Piauienses often attribute the “types of benefits voters demand” to personal character, village-level inequalities clearly limit access to moral, long-term political transactions to those people who already enjoy some local prestige. The very concept of “prestige” (prestígio), a term used even outside the political period, imposes a unity and “grade-ability” on multiple worth-creating factors within a person’s life. Some such factors are already objectified in quantifiable form, such as salary, number of hectares owned, heads of livestock, number of children, and so on. But prestige also derives from more labile relational factors, such as reliability for day-trading labor exchanges, propensity to grow violent when drunk, discreteness in sexual liaisons, and so on. If one’s intravillage prestige remains vague, situational, and mutable during everyday life, during the political period, electoral transactions reify and quantify local prestige by translating it into a sum of votes and then exchanging that sum for valued goods (visible to one’s neighbors).

Many of Caixa de Água’s residents “opened our doors” to a politician and “put his face [propaganda sticker] on our house,” because they wanted not only specific resources but also an ally “for all seasons.” Yet many found their postcampaign requests for building materials or medical procedures unanswered. They were given no favours that affirmed and assisted their conversion back from captured vote-bearing individuals to socially embedded persons. The politicians’ resource-maximizing strategy (i.e., their prioritization of “electors with multiple votes”) motivates them to predict which local electors are likely to “lock in” others’ votes, and they show remarkable attunement to variations and fluctuations of villagers’ local prestige. In making such rational decisions about resource allocations, politicians reflect back to the community a numerically expressed assessment of its members’ relative prestige, and these assessments then affect village-level inequalities.

The unfortunate case of Dona Rosalda reveals the mutual influence linking political transactions to intravillage status. When I met her in 2004, Rosalda (who was approximately 50 years old) was already widowed and living in a decent house within a cluster of homes occupied by several of her sons, who visited her regularly. I found her warm and clever, and I became especially close with one of her sons, Pedro, an Evangelical Christian and shop owner. Pedro kept his brothers on the straight and narrow, and his church attendance kept him and his mother connected to the village’s powerful “Silva” family. The Silvas had a usufruct title to the lands on which many people, Rosalda included, built their homes. The Silvas had, in one member’s words, “allowed Rosalda to stay” because her late husband belonged to a “distant branch” of the Silva family.

During the 2004 political season, Henrique courted Rosalda’s vote and, through her, those of her children, all of whom the erstwhile mayor had “left dissatisfied.” Rosalda helped Henrique gain his foothold in the village by letting him use her home to throw a political festa. She spoke highly of him, posted his propaganda stickers on her door, called him by his endearing nickname, and counted herself as gente de Henrique (one of Henrique’s people).

Rosalda’s life went downhill during Henrique’s time as mayor (2004–2012). Pedro and his family moved away, and another son joined with an estranged Silva nephew in committing small acts of theft in the village. Henrique probably learned of Rosalda’s misfortunes from a man named Valdo, a Silva who served as the deacon of the village church. Valdo had shown considerable charisma and intelligence by organizing the church’s refurbishment, and when Henrique heard of his success, he gave Valdo his cell phone number and told him to
call me whenever someone is in [health] trouble, and I’ll send a car.” He even bankrolled Valdo’s (unsuccessful) campaign for town alderman in 2008. That same year, Rosalda’s wayward son and his accomplice targeted Valdo’s uncle in a robbery. Valdo was enraged, and without Pedro’s church presence to temper his condemnation of Rosalda’s family, Valdo probably spared little charity for Rosalda herself when relating the story to Henrique.

Henrique disappointed Rosalda sometime during his second mandate (2009–2012) when another of her sons suffered a broken leg and needed surgery to reset the bone. The injured man had asked Henrique to pay for the surgery (outside of the political season), but Henrique didn’t say to “have patience.” Recounting this to me in 2014, Rosalda yelled in frustration, “How can a person have patience with a broken leg?” and swore she would never vote for Henrique again. Speaking of the Silvas who remained loyal to Henrique, Rosalda quipped that “they wait for him with their little mouths open” (perhaps like baby birds in the nest).

Still in 2014, Rosalda found herself in a kind of last-ditch bid to regain standing in her village. Her wayward son had come up with a plan to divest the Silvas of their lands. He enlisted the aid of a white man, Clebson, who lived in a neighboring village and who was on the payroll of the new mayor, Henrique’s successor and rival. Both that mayor and Clebson signed a document implying that some of the Silva lands belonged to Clebson, who Rosalda said was “the real representative of our community.” Rosalda began posting the new mayor’s propaganda materials on her door, and for a while her home became the hub of Clebson’s village supporters, many of whom were among Caixa de Água’s poorest residents, people who she said were “fed up with Henrique and all of his nauseating people (the Silvas).” But their faction lost the matter in court. The Silvas succeeded in debunking Clebson’s document, thanks in part to the lawyer that Henrique had hired for them. Rosalda took to drinking and became the butt of jokes. The police beat up her wayward son, and she had no recourse to justice, even though the mayor (Henrique’s rival) had ostensibly been her ally.

In 2015, she complained to me that she could not even get the mayor to pay her daughter’s bus fare to the capital city: “He was not there for me during the time of need (a hora de precisão)! I gave my vote to him. I didn’t have to do this. I could have given my vote to another! . . . We here only have value during the political season.” What struck me as particularly poignant was Rosalda’s reliance on the vote as a register of personal worth at a point in her life when her other fonts of extra-electoral prestige had collapsed. I note that she first insists that her mere possession of a vote should be enough to secure a politician’s friendship during her “time of need,” but she then acknowledges that a vote, by itself, does not do this. She de-personalizes this failure by framing it as a shared experience among her fellow villagers ("We here").

But not all her fellow villagers did share that experience; the Silva’s votes did secure politicians’ friendship. It was Rosalda’s low prestige (and that of some others in her village) that allowed Henrique, and later the other mayor, to forget his responsibility to her. Focusing on Henrique, he likely made the choice not to help her son, because he knew that Rosalda had lost influence over her son’s (and daughter-in-law’s) votes due to changes in kin residence, kin behavior, and inter household conflict.

It seems, then, that politicians tend to withhold from people like Rosalda the kinds of honorable exchanges outlined in the previous section, treating them like people “who only have value during the political season.” And conversely, the diminution of someone’s numerical value as an elector (from several votes to only one’s own) becomes a register for her general worthlessness to her neighbors after the electoral period passes and so creates a vicious cycle. I see this vicious cycle as the basis for a critique of sertanejo clientelism that hews more closely to sertanejos’ experiences than do liberal critiques of clientelism’s alienation of the vote from the citizen’s political will.

Conclusion

I have tried to illuminate the ethical and practical distinctions that animate sertanejos’ engagements in political clientelism in rural Piauí State. From within a liberal perspective, all such practices are tantamount to vote buying (hence bribery), and they corrupt elections because “(v)otes that are purchased carry little information about the preferences of the person who sold them” (Stokes et al. 2013:253). For sertanejos in Piauí State, however, a corrupt vote is not one that lacks information about voter (policy) preferences but rather one that carries little obligation to affirm the voter’s personhood (as in Mauss 1950 [1925]). The immoral vote is one that encourages a politician to leave the voter in a state of liminal individuality, rather than assisting the voter’s return from that state to one of socially integrated personhood. At the heart of this analysis is the claim that modern elections, organized by the principle of methodological individualism, presuppose a society comprised of free-moving particles, and this does not fit with the default understanding of the self-as-person (à la Da Matta [1991]) in this context. Nonetheless, sertanejos play brilliantly the local power game that has developed in relation to electoral rules, avidly transfiguring themselves into countable subjects and even facilitating their counting through the decoration of the homes. They have much to gain from doing so: not only a negotiated resource received in direct exchange for their vote(s), but also an ongoing gift-bearing friendship that boosts their local prestige. A politician’s friendship signals that the voter is worth more than his or her vote, that his or her personhood overflows their status as voter. As such, the moral vote reverses the voter’s liminal transformation into a quantum of value and restores his or her default personhood.

I have described this transformative process with attention to sertanejos’ performances of, and reflections on, self and groupness manifested during the “political period.” Sertanejos lament some aspects of their transformation into numerical individuals, such as the aggressive fanaticism, the breakdown
of neighborhood relations, and the objectification of one’s worth in the eyes of politicians who “smile at your vote.” And they enjoy others, such as the dissolution of their particularity into celebratory crowds, the effervescence of giving and rumor, and the vitality of controlled conflict. Becoming a countable unit of value also affords one a distinct form of agency during the political period; this consists in the steering of one’s vote until one must eventually allow it to be “locked in” by another person, a politician or a more prestigious neighbor. The end of the election signals the release of this lock and the freedom to once again navigate one’s friendships and labor relations and to rediscover one’s personhood in relation to imagined groupings. This is inevitable in all cases—nobody remains a free-moving particle—but only in some cases do politicians contribute to the affirmation of the voter’s postelectoral personhood: only in cases where it is “worth it” to them. And such judgments can have unjust causes and cruel effects.

Therefore, while this analysis asserts distance from liberal critiques of clientelism, it does not forgo critique altogether. Rather, it points to the failures of this particular form of clientelism to affirm and aid people, like Rosalda, who long for the consummation of electoral transactions only to be disappointed. In explaining such disappointments, rural Piauienses often point to the character defects and misdeeds of voters and politicians alike. But equally relevant are the intersecting dimensions of subalternity (e.g., Rosalda’s poverty, race, widowhood, and familial abandonment) that reduce people’s interhousehold prestige and make them less “worthy” of politicians’ investments.

By way of postscript, it bears noting that former President Dilma Rousseff once boasted that her party’s Bolsa Família Program “swept away hundreds of years of clientelistic politics” through the transfer of funds from the state to the poor (Braga 2013). This same program now stands in jeopardy, as the conservative interim government of Michel Temer “promotes the biggest cuts [to Bolsa Família] in history” (Brasil de Fato 2017). Debates over the fate of this policy raise the question of how such redistributive policies interact with sertanejo political ethics and categories of electoral transaction.

Given that poverty can diminish prestige and thus impede access to virtuous transactions, Bolsa Família’s monthly cash stipend may broaden access to the sorts of long-term patronage “friendships” described here. Moreover, because the cash grant offsets the need for unmarried youth to leave their parents’ household in search of migrant labor, it can improve the household’s prestige by increasing the number of votes its senior heads can commit to a politician (Barbosa 2006). Bolsa Família may also improve household prestige by affording grant-holding parents (especially mothers) added leverage over their children’s voting behavior. Increasing household economic wellbeing may therefore push sertanejos away from “vote buying” and toward electoral transactions that pressure politicians to support them during “all seasons.” At the same time, Bolsa Família and other related programs may also cause a shift in local political ethics toward liberal sensibilities. Not only do the program’s federal and state representatives explicitly decry clientelism (Ansell 2014), the relative stability of Bolsa Família’s stipend (and supportive services) throws into relief the periodic failures of local politicians to sustain moral friendships even with prestigious households. As a result, people may no longer wish to render themselves countable during election time.

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A Ritual of Corruption
How Young Middle-Class South Africans Get Their Driver’s Licenses

by Julia Hornberger

Based on rich oral and written narratives by the students of my third-year class on the anthropology of the state, this article discusses the changing practical and affective relationship of young middle-class people with the South African state. The article centers around how both black and white middle-class students have similar experiences of not being able to pass their drivers’ license test without being confronted with paying a bribe. I argue that getting a driver’s license represents a transformative moment in the life of a young South African aspiring to join the middle class, not only in terms of their personal life cycle but also in terms of encountering and negotiating a relationship with the state for the first time on their own. While this encounter is animated by excitement about the freedoms of adulthood, it also represents the shift from being under parental authority to being under the authority of the state. I argue that the young people emerge from this encounter in a way that interrupts racialized historical continuities by offering a new sense of belonging for some and bringing about a kind of civic disillusionment for others as part of their entry into adulthood.

For the past several years, in my role as a lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, I have been teaching a course on the anthropology of the state. In this class, I experimented with students self-analyzing their relationship with the state to bring about an understanding of otherwise rather abstract theories of the state. As part of this applied pedagogy, I came to think of students as ethnographic interlocutors, challenging me to work on a more fine-grained ethnography of the state (Gupta 1995).

It has been around questions of corruption that these attempts have shown their most vibrant side. I have found a rich source of ethnographic material in the arguments and anecdotes put forward by students that deserves careful interpretation. These stories, oscillating between snug complicity and outrage, often demarcate young people’s historical relationship to the state, often mediated through their parents’ backgrounds. It was here that a racial difference between white and black students became overt. Yet, one ubiquitous narrative was shared: the story about how they acquired their driver’s licenses. None of the students could tell the story of “passing the test” without recounting how they had been confronted with the demand to pay a bribe to the examiner for passing them. Most of them succumbed to this demand.

In this article, I deal with the convergence of experience between black and white students. I argue that getting a driver’s license represents a transformative moment in the life of a young South African aspiring to join the middle class, not only in terms of their personal life cycle but also in terms of encountering and negotiating a relationship with the state for the first time on their own. While this negotiation is animated by excitement about the freedoms of adulthood, it also represents the shift from being under parental authority to being under the authority of the state.

Analyzing students’ narratives, I ask what practical and affective form their relationship with the state takes and—considering that apartheid history was built on fundamentally different citizen-state relationships for black and white people—what this ritual of citizenship says about the shifting relationship of the state to its middle class(es) in a context that, 23 years into democracy, has seen the emergence of a new black middle class and some unsettling of the white middle class. Many authors have written about the emerging African middle class (Melber 2016; Ncube and Lufumpa 2014; Phadi and Ceruti 2011), but they do not always deal with its relationship to the state and focus even less on its particular role in corruption or anti-corruption. Where this relationship is addressed, it is often on the basis of broad socioeconomic markers, rough materialistic brush strokes, and assumptions about party alignment based on rational choice (Alexander et al. 2013; Southall 2016). What is missing in many of these accounts is the affective dimension that characterizes everyday relations with the state. It is this dimension—and a fine-grained focus on how it actually feels to be(come) corrupt—that I hope to add to this discussion.

Julia Hornberger is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at the University of the Witwatersrand (Robert Sobukwe Block 22, East Campus, WITS 2050, South Africa [julia.hornberger@wits.ac.za]). This paper was submitted 6 IV 17, accepted 7 XI 17, and electronically published 26 III 18.
But why the middle class? Because most of my students are exactly that: they either already come from a middle-class background, especially (but not exclusively) if they are white, or they are at the cusp of establishing a middle-class identity for themselves. While many black students come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds and might be the first in the family to enter university, earning a degree from the University of the Witwatersrand will almost certainly provide them with some form of well-paid employment. The “possession of a degree remains a ticket of entry to the black middle class” (Southall 2016:118). Such ascendancy, however, is not entirely a given. Recent protests at South African universities demanding free education point to the precarity of what it takes to secure a middle-class future through a degree from a university. Dropout rates are a potent indicator of this precarity.

What It Means to Be Able to Drive

It is in the light of this precarity that more immediate and performative signs of middle-class belonging gain extra valence. Classically, these are found in the registers of dress and style, rooted in conspicuous consumption (Bourdieu 1984; Iqani 2015; Posel 2010). However, I am arguing here that being able to drive, be it one’s own car or one borrowed from a friend or family member, is another of these signs of social distinction. In Johannesburg, as in many cities of the Global South, official public transportation has always been an afterthought (Simone 2004). Moving around in a private car instead of being dependent on informally organized and crowded public transportation provides for security and social discreteness and counts as an indicator of class membership.

The meaning of being able to drive is much greater in what, even for securely situated middle-class youth, is a highly anticipated moment in a young person’s life cycle: the acquisition of a driver’s license. It marks a big step toward independence. It allows young people to escape the purview of the parents who would otherwise have to drive them around. It allows them to explore the city’s nightlife on their own and increases their discretion as to where and with whom they want to hang out (Hunter 2010). It is a form of initiation into adulthood. As we will see, my students distinctly evoke this sense of their life cycle and the ritual quality that getting a driver’s license marks in their growing up.

What they make less explicit—but what is crucial to my argument and distinguishes this middle-class marker from others—is that obtaining a driver’s license initiates them not just into adulthood but also into a direct relationship with the state. In her article “Driving While Palestinian in Israel and the West Bank,” Amahl Bishara (2015) discusses how maneuvering on the state-built (and blocked) roads requires a highly affective and embodied experience through which “people test out their relationships with the state, especially when these relationships are contentious” (34). I would like to argue here that getting a driver’s license is a similar way of engaging with and testing the state infrastructure.

I also see similarities with respect to the embodied nature of the process and the way it is loaded with affect. As I will show, getting a driver’s license makes for a whole affective schema that stretches from anxiety to rage to huge excitement. It is

1. I am applying a very loose definition of middle class here. Research in South Africa has shown that, in fact, many people of hugely diverging economic status call themselves middle class. This serves to distinguish them from the very poor who struggle to make a living and from the elites for whom salaried income is hardly an issue, as their assets take the form of investments (Phadi and Ceruti 2011). Others have argued that to speak of a single middle class is misleading, because the conditions of becoming middle class have radically diversified, especially with the central role that the South African state has played in bringing into being the new black middle class (Southall 2016). Both of these aspects serve well to account for the range of aspirations toward being middle class that can be found among the students of my class. But it is the idea of a regular salaried income, potentially with benefits, and the stability and predictability that this produces that is at the center of my understanding of the middle class here. And a completed education from one of the best universities in the country promises entry into some form of stable employment, even under conditions of economic decline.

2. There is still the drawback that many of the black students come from schools that insufficiently prepare them for the demands and entry requirements of universities. And even if they make it into a prestigious university like the University of the Witwatersrand, they struggle financially, often finding it difficult to pay the fees and earn a decent living (Southall 2016:118). The hardship this involves is severe. It often means that they accumulate huge debt, that they constantly have to beg for support from friends and family, that they often go hungry, and that they end up sleeping in libraries and other provisional places. Parents sell their houses and televisions just to pay the student fees, sacrificing their own possible entry into the middle class for that of their children.

3. While relatively recently there have been a few attempts at establishing forms of public transportation that are truly public and even appeal to people who have cars, generally speaking, trains, minibus taxis, and metro buses are for the working class who, on top of having to travel long distances, are being further inconvenienced with irregular schedules, overcrowding at peak hours, and lack of security. Of course, minibus taxis develop their own vibrant sociality and normativity that often endanger them to those traveling on them, but this also precludes the discreteness that marks a certain middle-class way of life.

4. While some students might get the money for the license from their parents, others actually take up casual labor to be able to afford to pay for the classes and tests.

5. One of her ethnographic vignettes describes how she took a road trip to the edge of the Mediterranean with a Palestinian friend from the West Bank and two Palestinian citizens of Israel (Bishara 2015:39). On departing, they all embraced the freedom of being out on the road. This feeling, however, is constantly frustrated. They are confronted with road closures and actively dismantled roads that lead to former Palestinian villages. Here, “in its matter-of-fact materiality, traveling by car underscores or engrains Palestinians’ understanding of the injustices of living under military occupation” (Bishara 2015:34). At the same time, Bishara describes skilled and energetic driving maneuvers that defy these erasures and blockages and that speak of a less totalizing relationship to an unjust state.
animated by the passionate desire to drive and by the pressure of having to pass theoretical and practical tests (at least in appearance). But most of all it is animated by the often-intimidating encounter with the state, which claims discretionary power to decide whether the desire will be fulfilled, and finally by the existential challenge, of both a moral and procedural nature, of whether and how to pay a bribe. To frame the kind of affective relationship with the state that is at stake here, I am particularly thinking with Laurent Berlant’s (2010) “cruel optimism”: an affective attachment to a particular thing or relationship (being allowed to drive), even if this relationship wears you out (being compromised through complicity in corruption), because it is this (corrupt) relationship that seemingly holds “the condition of possibility” for the “good life” (97).

A Corrupt State: From the Past to the Present

If indeed most students are similarly compelled into corruption when faced with getting their driver’s license, and there is no determining connection to their racial and longue durée socioeconomic background, this raises a question regarding the shifting landscape of middle-class corruption in South Africa. To make this point clearer, I would like to make a short historical and conceptual detour into the past and present of (South) African corruption.

Writing of the preapartheid era of colonial rule in Johannesberg, Hyslop (2005) credits the British administration with establishing something like a Weberian system, which stressed professionalism and long-term loyalty to the state. This brought an end to a purely patronage-based rule instituted under Paul Kruger’s South African Republic, but it also shifted the rent-seeking bias toward the Anglophone mining class. When the National Party came to power later in the twentieth century and again took control of the state away from the Anglophone community, their policies of preferential state employment for Afrikanders brought about the establishment of a new white Afrikaans-speaking middle and capitalist class (Hyslop 2005: 782). Hyslop (2005:781–782), however, contends that the actual workings of the state were, at the outset, relatively noncorrupt, as this new state elite conceived of its political mission as sacred. What this meant was that the English-speaking middle class, which otherwise relied more on the private sector for its economic existence, equally benefited from a well-functioning public, but racially exclusive, state infrastructure. Roads were well paved, public schools were subsidized, the police would come when they were called, and public hospitals offered excellent care.

Meanwhile, black South Africans faced a state that gave them little in terms of public resources. Moreover, to make a living, they had to get past the legal barriers that the state had put up for them (e.g., various pass laws, the Natives Land Act [1913], the Bantu Education Act [1953], and the Group Areas Act [1950]). This often compelled them into criminalizing practices (such as being in the city without a pass). It was in response to this constant humiliation that the anti-apartheid movement developed principled ideas of all-inclusiveness for the liberated state (i.e., the Freedom Charter). At the same time, various practices of indirect rule, such as the advisory board system in the urban townships and the building of the rural “homelands,” produced, on the one hand, a black bureaucratic elite (Southall 2016) and nurtured, on the other hand, a deep-seated rule of patron-client relationships (Hyslop 2005; Lodge 2014).

As the apartheid project started to show severe cracks and the ideological commitment to it dwindled, even within the National Party itself, more and more corruption scandals erupted, and the everyday fabric of the white state bureaucracy lost its moral cohesion (Hyslop 2005:784).

It is this history of corruption from which the new democratic state had to emerge. One way in which this took place is that the African National Congress (ANC) government, not unlike the National Party government earlier, transformed huge parts of the state bureaucracy by appointing politically loyal people to senior positions and “applying a policy of racial affirmative action in civil service appointments” (Hyslop 2005:785). This means that the new black middle class “remains heavily dependent upon the ANC’s party-state. . . . The black middle class is overwhelmingly rooted in public-sector employment, which has not merely been protected but has grown since the onset of a global recession in 2008” (Southall 2016:92, 94).

This dependency on the state immediately implies a loyalty toward the state and a sense of entitlement that would be conducive to patron-client relationships as well as demands for preferential treatment. At least, this has been the norm in many other postcolonial African states, where the state, rather than the private economy (mainly foreign owned), is the medium of enrichment and social aspiration (Bayart 1993) and where neopatrimonial relationships have come to stand in for the lack of legitimacy of state institutions. While these neopatrimonial relationships have produced rather ambivalent complicities, where people emulate the patriarchal “big man” but simultaneously hollow out the relationship through burlesque laughter (Mbembe 2001), there seems to be little escape from them. In other words, no matter if it is about being elected as a regional leader or if one wants to get a license to sell liquor in a village, a principle of personal give and take would always apply. Democratization does not necessarily form a counterpoint to this kind of governance (Pitcher, Moran, and Johnston 2009), because a growing, seemingly legal-rational bureaucratic apparatus can enable a growing patrimonial network (Medar 1996). The issue, then, rather becomes one of who has the kind of social capital that allows them to demand a favor from a social network and who lacks such capital; in the later case, one is exposed to predatory corruption and has to pay for services (Sardan 1999).

6. A partial exception to this is the homeland of KwaZulu. Homeland rule under Buthelezi was one of the few that enjoyed some—if only some—measure of popular legitimacy and where homeland employees developed something like a bureaucratic ethos and professional pride.
But is this really a given for South Africa? As Hyslop has shown with regard to the early Afrikaner bureaucracy, a strong belief in the ideological mission of the state has meant that preferential ethnic hiring could still translate into a legal-rational dedication to service delivery (in contrast to self-enrichment) for the privileged. In this case, we would have to ask how far the current imaginary of the nation’s future is bound up with the aspirations of a new middle class. Do they see themselves as part of a political project of transforming the state into a proper public institution, or are they the precarious beneficiaries of history, whose right to flourish might be reversed at any time? And how far is this scenario of African neopatrimonialism, which normally centers around the idea of elites, valid for South Africa’s exceptionally large emerging middle class, which distinguishes itself quite clearly from elites (Alexander et al. 2013)?

Generally speaking, middle classes have always created stability through an obligation toward a liberal market democracy and served as “modernisers who embody a positive vision of social mobility and meritocratic social order” (Lenz quoted in Southall 2016:230). Yet it seems that this is contingent on economic growth and the promise of more wealth to go around. Meanwhile, in times of economic decline, middle classes seem to be willing to embrace authoritarian tendencies as long as they protect their exclusive access to state resources (Southall 2016). In many ways, this was exactly the situation of the white middle class during apartheid. In addition, the relationship to political leaders, as in the support of the rural poor for Zuma, is underpinned by a desire to be personally embraced by a state in a way that can bring about personal as well as collective security (White 2012). Is this a relationship of which the new middle class is suspicious, but which it also pursues?

In my students’ narratives, a different aspect of the new black middle class comes to the fore. When I asked my students how many of them might see themselves becoming civil servants, only three out of 60 would shyly lift their hand. This stands in disagreement with, or at least qualifies, the way that Southall (2016) points to the deep anchorage of the middle class in the public service. What this instead shows is that the next generation sees its social aspirations as tightly bound up not with the state but rather with entry into the private sector and the professions. It is thus, after all, a future of professionalization, with values steeped in the ideology of meritocratic achievement and trust in independent knowledge, expertise, and ethical codes, that they seem to embrace, further complicating their relations to the state.

While this frames and interrogates the ethnographic material regarding many black students, the historical and contemporary analytics regarding the white students in my class are different. The situation that the white middle class is facing is one in which they are no longer the center of state attention but instead have to share resources with the entire population, and they are being subjected to a state service that often doubts whether they are deserving. One reaction to this has been the bifurcation into public and private services, especially in the fields of schooling, health, and security. But first, not everybody can afford to buy themselves out of public services, and there are always some services that remain purely in state hands—such as getting a driver’s license. In terms of employment, both Afrikaans- and English-speaking whites have increasingly been discouraged from public employment through stringent affirmative action policies, and they rely now entirely on the private sector and the independent professions to keep intact their belief in their meritocratic achievement. But even there they face the challenges of a racialized competition. Does this mean that the white middle class will follow the route of what Muir (2016) has described in the case of the Argentinian middle class as “historical exhaustion”? Using corruption as a folk category of critique, she shows how Argentinian middle-class society, having gone from economic crisis to economic crisis and from corruption scandal to corruption scandal, has lost any sense of optimistic cohesion and instead has come to define itself around the idea of loss and moral decay, which penetrates everything from the private to the national sphere, including familial relationships, public institutions, and imaginaries of the future. Such negative belonging is confirmed through admission of complicity in banal everyday acts of corruption (Muir 2016). In other words, will the white South African middle class fall from its colonial grace and become corrupt as well?

On a more political level, what we have seen so far coming from the white middle class is the display of what could rather be called “historical exasperation”, a lamentation about the direction that the country has taken, but without much considering one’s own role in that direction, while frantically holding on to one’s compromised moral high ground and privilege. Similar to what has been taking shape in many other parts of the world (see this issue of Current Anthropology), in South Africa, this has given rise to very vocal anti-corruption politics, which, however, often blur denunciations of corrupt actors and practices with a vengeful delegitimization of the redistributive projects of the more left-leaning (at least in its promises) ANC government. The lack of political alternatives provided by the Democratic Alliance—the main, traditionally white, opposition party—to deal with the inequality in the country is symptomatic of this kind of politics. The Democratic Alliance is, however, thriving on the growing number of outrageous corruption scandals involving the president and his adviser’s and loyal friends. Such disgust, as recent public protest has shown, has also taken hold among many members of the black middle class (mainly living in the cities) and the urban poor. Yet the Democratic Alliance’s victories in many urban centers in the last local election were still made possible only by the fact that large numbers of black ANC supporters merely abstained from voting. This then leaves as an open question what the broader traction will be of the neoliberal anti-corruption populism of the Democratic Alliance or whether a different critique is possible in which anti-corruption is part of a politics of redistribution and continued historical re-dress.

This also does not tell us what happens to the white middle class in their everyday relationship to the state when things
need to be done in order to make life happen, be it getting a permit for their business, obtaining an unabridged marriage certificate, or partaking of any other state service. This question is particularly open ended in the case of white students who, despite their minority status, might seek a sense of belonging in South Africa.

It is these rather open-ended historical trajectories and roughly painted scenarios of contemporary realities that will find some answers in my focus on the ritual of getting one’s driver’s license. What follows, then, is an analysis of how the acquisition of a driver’s license initiates these students into corrupt relationships with the state. This will serve to develop a sense of how this ritual of citizenship shapes the practical and affective relationship of these young people toward the state, what kind of politics it lends itself to, and what kind of “moral sensibilities will that occasion” (Lomnitz referenced in Muir 2016).

Laughter and Corruption

My analysis of this relationship is based on ethnographic material that emerged from the classrooms where I have taught a course on the anthropology of the state to third-year undergraduate students. I would like to thank my students for their trust in sharing this material with me. Some of the material consists of accounts of what was discussed in class. The core of the material, however, is from an assignment in which these students had to narrate an encounter with the state that involved corruption. The account did not have to be first hand, but many students decided to narrate a first-hand experience. Of 80 students, about one-third wrote about how they got their driver’s license.

When we had discussions in class about corruption and students volunteered their experiences, these stories were often told with much craft and were followed by much laughter, more as if we were sitting around a kitchen table or in a bar than as if we were in a classroom. The point, of course, was that telling these stories could never be neutral, because in most cases they involved, if not complicity with, then at least intimate proximity to a corrupt interaction. As such, these are highly charged and morally ambiguous stories, the telling of which involves not only the possibility of captivating one’s audience but also a moral risk. It appeared that only through the mediation of laughter, by placing oneself in the genre of the comical rather than the factual or legal, could those who were implicated in the story be open about corruption without being condemned for it (see also Musaraj 2018). It is thus important in reading the following accounts by my students to keep in mind that they were written in this spirit of storytelling.7 Let me, then, finally begin recounting some of these stories.

Diverging Histories

I begin with a set of stories of encounters with the state and corruption in which parents are still prominently involved. As I have already mentioned, there is a racial convergence in the experience of my students with respect to having to navigate the process of obtaining a driver’s license. Such convergence gains significance when considered against the background of the fundamentally different histories of state relations experienced by their parents, from which the students would have learned a great deal.

N.K., one of the black female students in the class, recounted a story in which her father was central to dealing with the state. N.K. had been diagnosed with a serious illness, but the medication she had been given was ineffective. The response from the doctors was that they could not help any further. This is when her father “decided to ask more about this from this other lady from church who was a nurse.” She promptly invited N.K. to see her at the clinic.

She said I didn’t have to queue, but I should ask the people who work there to show me her office. I went straight to her consultation room; she told everyone that I was her child. She took my file, asked someone to get me a stamp and to write me a doctor’s note. She checked me. She then asked me a few questions about my diet, stress level, and if I have someone I share my problems with. Later we started chatting about my family, school, and my parents. She then went to ask someone to get me medication, and I left hospital within 30 minutes while there were people who had been there since 6 am. I kept going to her for months, and she would even inform me when she was not coming to work.

Here, the shared church membership provided the father with the social capital that allowed him to ask for a favor from a public servant. No money was exchanged. It was purely a matter of social obligation. Through this, N.K. received the necessary treatment that the public system would not grant her. This helped her to improve her condition, and she learned a visceral lesson, mediated through the help of her father, regarding the importance and possibility of such networks.

Other accounts that black students gave of observing how their family dealt with the state were less existential but still part of their memory of childhood. One student recounted how she went on a family trip in an overloaded car when she was little, and her uncle swiftly negotiated a deal with a traffic cop, well captured in this interaction between the student’s grandmother and uncle: “My grandmother tells my uncle not to try anything ‘stupid’ and to cooperate with the traffic officer. Here in their entirety; instead, I have picked them apart to cluster their contents. This takes away some of their vibrancy, but they still should not be read like factual accounts that would invite a moral or legal judgment but rather as reflections of a lived, embedded, and always already ambivalent social relationship with the state, its institutions, and its personnel.
My uncle grudgingly agrees but says to her, ’Please let me handle this so we can be on our way again soon as we have a long way to travel.’ One can just imagine how the confident way the uncle negotiated the relationship with the state official stayed in her mind and gave her a sense of security through his ability to ‘handle the situation.’

Other moments of witnessing engraved themselves through disenchantment. R.B., a black female student, described how her mother was stopped by the police and, to her surprise, not only succumbed to but even initiated the possibility of resolving the situation with a bribe. The student concluded the account, expressing a sense of discomfort and vulnerability that stuck in her memory. “To that day, I have never seen my mother beg anyone, seeing her beg that officer was shocking, how people change when they encounter law enforcers and actually end up breaking the law with them.”

The picture these students draw is one where they witness and experience vulnerability to the state but also skilled negotiations with the state and the ingrained nature of managing life through practices of give and take across the divide of officialdom. This stands in contrast to another set of accounts. These are accounts in which students have managed to avoid corruption and have been protected against it by their parents, mainly their fathers. Not surprisingly, these are accounts of white students.

K.S., a white female student, told the story of how she was on her way home from a yoga class in the early hours of the evening when she was stopped by a policeman at a road block. “He was shining his torch upon my license disk, gestured for me to pull over to the side of the road. I promptly did so. Being twenty years of age and a female, I was immediately afraid.” While she had heard many stories about unpleasant interactions with the police, until then she had never been pulled over by the police. When she rolled down the window, a police officer leaned in and told her that her license had expired.

He threatened me with saying, “I am going to have to impound your car and give you a 3,000 rand fine. Where do you live? How are you going to get home?” “You must be joking!” I ejaculated in response, looking at his unsmiling face, which could not have looked more serious, his mouth, composed in a long frown, eyebrows furrowed low over his dark eyes. After clarifying that, no, he was not joking, I took out my phone. Visibly upset, I phoned home, placing the call on speaker. “Hello!” My father’s loud, booming voice came over the speaker. Upon hearing the surly male voice, the officer stood up. Drawing up a fine of 1,000 rand, he handed it through the open window. “Go,” he said angrily, and it just then occurred to me that he wanted a bribe, and I had failed to take the cue.

Ingenuousness, mixed with a sense of incredulity, wins out here over the fear of the threatening behavior of the state official. This sense that, while she might have heard many stories about corruption in traffic stops, this could not possibly involve her is important here. It shows how distant she was from the need to negotiate with the state and how deaf she was to the subtle language that initiates the negotiations. For the police officer, the sudden “presence” of the father complicates matters. A historical script of racial hierarchy kicks in. Meanwhile, for the student, it confirmed a sense that, within the realm of her father, the law was still law.

Such patriarchal influence is also evoked in the following account by C.S., another white female student, of a time when she and her father were driving back with a trailer from Durban. They were stopped in a road block when intense negotiation between her confident father and an unbending traffic cop, who insisted on a bribe, ensued. The student captured her memory of the event in the following dialogue:

The traffic cop claimed, “Sir, your trailer license is invalid; it does not match the trailer.” He said so arrogantly. Dad responded with honesty. “That is the license I got in the mail as I renewed my license.” The traffic cop repeated his monologue about the trailer’s license being invalid for about 30 minutes. The traffic cop then “grew in confidence, aggression, and elicited a tone of intimidation.” He threatened the father with being locked up over the weekend and having to pay a huge fine. The father remained unmoved and insisted that he had no money on him. After further negotiations, the traffic cop gave up and allowed the father to proceed.

It is striking how the student represented her father’s moral uprightness in contrast to the police officer’s ugliness. Her father responded “honestly,” while the police officer “claimed” and “repeated” his monologue before he became aggressive and intimidating. The admiration of the daughter for her father’s role in the encounter with the state is beyond doubt.

I am intrigued by these different renditions of morality, which I have presented here as the effect of a long-term racial history. I am thinking in Weberian (1978 [1922]) terms: morality as the effect of being suspended in a net of politico-material realities that shape the subjective posture toward the state. It should be clear that the moral high ground and the habitus of immunity, as much as the ingenuity required for survival and the investment in social relationships, are the subjective expression of what was possible under the state-citizen relationships of apartheid and its structural aftermath. They serve us as the background against which the following question arises: Into what kind of morality is the (aspiring) middle-class youth of today interpolated as they leave behind the shelter of home and come to confront the state for the first time on their own?

Converging Presents

This finally brings me to the practice of getting a driver’s license. In South Africa, one can get a learner driver’s license at 16 years of age. A proper driver’s license can only be acquired at the age of 18. For this, a student normally takes lessons with a private but state-approved driving school and then takes an examination with the state licensing department and a state-
employed driving examiner. It is common lore, as many local news reports attest (Enoch 2016; Petersen 2015; Rawoot 2010), that the licensing department is one of the most corrupt state institutions in the country. This has been confirmed by the provincial department itself (Gauteng Province 2013). A range of inquiries and changes has been promised (Baloyi 2014), but little has changed in the meantime (Corruption Watch 2017). Still, my students recounted that they did not automatically expect to be asked for a bribe, and white students, in particular, took a while to figure out that a bribe was being solicited.

**Ritual Form**

The young people of my class saw getting a driver’s license as an important step toward adulthood. A.K., a black female student, confirmed that getting a driver’s license forms an important milestone in a young person’s life course. “For most teenagers in South Africa, turning 18 years old means independence and the beginning of adulthood, and with that comes learning how to drive and getting your driver’s license: like reverse parking or starting on a hill, as they are infamous stumbling stones on the way to getting the license. Some of these maneuvers have a heightened aura about them, like reverse parking or starting on a hill, as they are infamous stumbling stones on the way to getting the license. Together with how everybody has to follow the same steps—signing up with a driving school, taking classes, and then registering for a date with the state examiner—this forms the stable framework that turns the students’ individual experiences into a collective event that transcends the here and now and connects them to each other across time and space (Durkheim 1997 [1893]).”

The ultimate element of a ritual is, of course, the forging of a transcendental connection, in this case to the state—represented through the state examiner. The examiner indeed comes with a lot of power. He or she, ruling with the decree of the state, decides whether the young person will or will not make the step into adulthood.

The fact that the process of getting a driver’s license does indeed fulfill the classic expectations of a ritual is important in the sense that the process is thus not simply an unpleasant one-off encounter but has the potential to transform the young people’s connection to the state, like an originary mold for the subject-citizens that these young people become. In the ritual form also lies the potential to introduce a break in the diverging historical continuities of young middle-class South Africans and produce a lasting moment of collective convergence (Kertzer 1997).

**Beginning and End of Meritocracy**

But what kind of order is being ritually imprinted on these citizens-to-be? For the state, is it about correct driving? And for the young people, is it really about freedom?

While this is what the state claims for itself, and while this is where my students’ focus lies, I am arguing here that what is really created is a shift from being under the authority of parents to being directly under the authority of the state. While the parents are, of course, still in the background (e.g., paying for the driver’s license and offering advice), it is the youth themselves who have to negotiate the bureaucratic process.
In the case of C.R., a black female student, her description made clear how she was moved from the realm of the influence of the mother into the realm of the corrupt state. She stressed that “most teenagers generally book their date with the examiner via their driving school. Instead, I was taught how to drive by my mother.” She only hired a driving teacher for two final driving lessons, in which she learned to do the “steep hill” and parallel parking. She narrated how she went through the test confidently step by step, still convinced that the preparation that she had done on her own with the help of her mother would make her smoothly glide through the process. And indeed, she only made one mistake. Yet:

The examiner called me into his office then hands me my scoring sheet. The only thing I had gotten wrong out of the criteria of twenty items was the emergency stop, which means I had passed my test. He then drew the curtains in his office and became serious, staring me in the eye and said “my dear as you can see you did not get a perfect score therefore that means you have failed. In order for me to be able to let you get your drivers you need to give me a little incentive.” He went on to tell me that every driving school instructor charges this amount into the packages, which guarantees, whether their student can drive or not, they will pass. He didn’t understand why my driving instructor did not pay for me.

In the end, the student sought council from her temporary instructor, who confirmed the need for an extra 1,000 rand—a counsel she followed and which allowed her to get her license. By this time, the confidence was gone, and the importance of what she had actually learned from her mother moved into the background, while the conversation behind the curtain with the state-employed examiner (confirmed by the instructor) provided the ultimate directives.

The dismantling of a sense of autonomy and control rooted in the study of the necessary knowledge comes across even more strongly in other accounts. M.K. told us how, “I was not only excited to take the test but I was absolutely prepared.” Taking many practices tests, her certainty grew that she would pass. Yet a “mysterious” man at the testing station told her “that it didn’t matter how many times I got a perfect score . . . I would fail the real test unless we made an arrangement.” She reacted with outrage to his suggestion. Then the day of her test arrived, and she failed. She also failed the second time around. She recounted:

Every time I took the test, the mystery man would smirk at me, as if he was suggesting that I was a stubborn fool for wanting to do the right thing. It took three attempts for me to realize that something had to give; I either had to give into the corruption or give up on my license.

What strikes me here is the slow dawning of what is going on. M.K. started out with so much confidence in her ability to study the rules. Then a sense of doubt crept in, which accumulated until she gave into it. The official who was able to increasingly unsettle her became the grotesque face of the state, which poisoned her bright spirit until she surrendered.

The accounts of the students followed a similar pattern. One black male student, S.N., recounted how he had heard rumors about bribery, but “at this point, I had no clue what he was murmering about. I was more occupied with remembering the body parts of the inside and outside of the car.” Besides studying hard for the test, he had also made sure to have every single thing ready, every document necessary. I even took my birth certificate with for good measure.” Still hopeful to be able to have control over the situation, he watched how the woman who took the test before him handed over a brown envelope to a bright and jovially laughing examiner and happily passed the test. That is when he started remembering the rumors. And indeed, the moment he started interacting with the same examiner without having paid a bribe, he faced an entirely different persona.

The same test conductor was cold and short with me. I went through my test quite quickly until I had to do the parallel parking, my test conductor got on the phone and stopped paying attention. She made a phone call and moved away from the vehicle and turned her back toward the car. I carried on with the test, fitted the car into the parking space with ease. She turned around, put her phone away and shouted “fail” and began writing on her clip board. She tore off a copy of the sheet she was marking and suggested that I had already failed before we even started. She immediately asked me to drive out the yard as the test was over; she disappeared into the office and before long my instructor came to the car and said that’s how it works.

By looking away, the examiner made very clear that nothing the student had practiced for mattered. It is as if one kind of rationality is being broken down and a different one is being established, that of the arbitrary mightiness of the examiner, whose volatile mood can only be assuaged with the adequate gift. The power is shifted from the ability to study and drive well to the ability to negotiate a deal with the driving instructor and the examiner. M.K. recounted how painful it is when the grounds of certainty regarding what is true and what is not true shift.

I do everything perfectly with no stalling, rolling, or anything wrong for that matter. But as I’m doing the last parking, he starts crossing out everything on the sheet. When I ask him why, he tells me that I rolled, so it’s a fail. I’m trying to keep my composure as the anger tears start rolling down my face, because I know that he is not telling the truth.

Pain and anger are expressed as students are compelled to recognize the new rules of the game. Some still try to argue or to make an appeal, but generally all this falls on deaf ears. This shows how fundamental this transition is. While the students thought that they would gain independence, they suddenly realize, with a great sense of horror, that they can only do so at the price of submitting to a system that will only accept them in
their complicity to its rottenness. If they refuse it, the possibility of making life happen is taken away from them. So they come out at the other end of the process new but tainted.

In the encounter with the state, then, the trust in professionalism and meritocracy gets dismantled. For the white middle class, being able to retain a belief in meritocracy was always part of its privilege. Meanwhile, young black students—often through the encouragement of their parents, especially their mothers, who would do anything to get their children into the best schools possible—have equally come to believe that studying hard will be rewarded and afford them with opportunity. The blossoming or habituated sense of control over one’s destiny is then replaced by the need to recognize a new authority, which involves compromising what it means to be free. And while this authority appears, at first, as highly irrational—and for many remains so, together with a feeling of violation—for some it becomes a new way of belonging.

New Middle-Class Citizen-Subject

When M.K.’s experience of getting a driver’s license came up in class, she at first did not want to admit that she had succumbed to paying a bribe to the examiner. When she finally did admit it, she hung her head in shame. Like her, many of the students seemed to still to carry around a sense of blemish and guilt even after months or years. M.K.’s case is interesting in that she, as I learned in class, came from a political background. Her mother had been actively involved in the anti-apartheid struggle and now worked for the state. In other class discussions, M.K. would often put forward a position of political idealism, combined with a sense of being empowered to make demands of the state that it act in a correct way. She clearly connected her own personal trajectory with an optimistic account of the country’s future. This did not allow her to easily resolve the contradiction between her aspiring professional habitus and the corrupt citizen into which the encounter with the state had interpolated her.

Meanwhile, some of the other students, both white and black, moved on quite quickly and, at the end of their accounts, had already embraced their new relationship to the state. S.L. proudly announced, after having followed the rules of paying the bribe: “Needless to say, I passed the exam, and I was grateful that my gift was accepted and successful.” Here, instead of anger, gratitude is being expressed that things have run smoothly.

For K.G., the white female student, the shift of rationalities already became the grounds for judging the world. She concluded her account by remarking rather reflectively: “When people do not achieve what they want, it can be cathartic to blame someone else. In this case, people can blame the fact that they did not bribe anyone either due to their own high moral standards or that they simply did not know the right person.” According to this version of how the relationship to the world and the state works, moral high grounds are only an excuse for not having figured out how to work the system to one’s own advantage. What shines through here is actually a sense of maturity, and outrage is replaced with a pride in knowing how to play the game, speaking to a certain level of jouissance that comes with mastering one’s life outside of the law—as Gassan Hage (2015) recently remarked in a talk on Lebanese expatriates who were bemoaning the sense of lifelessness that comes with living in a country in which everything is regulated, contrasted with the sense of play that comes with mastering, for example, the traffic chaos back home.

In fact, there is actually a progressive learning curve that comes when one has accepted doing things according to a rationality whereby access to the state and to service in general is never just a given or subject to skill and merit. Some of the students who had started to learn about corruption as a form of essential social capital much earlier, not just through their parents but in their own capacity, came to the testing ground already occupying, materially and morally, an entirely different premise. S.M. tells the story of her friend Sandra:

Sandra was assisted by a traffic police examiner by the name of Mpho. Mpho and Sandra knew each other from Postnet. Chelsea used to work at Postnet, and her job was to type curriculum vitae and memorandums for clients, design the invitation cards, and assist people with computers. One day, Mpho was one of her clients, and he wanted Chelsea to help him by designing wedding invitation cards for him. Chelsea helped him. The amount of money that Mpho was supposed to pay for these cards was 800 rand, but Chelsea decided to privately charge him 400 rand. This money was supposed to be for the company, but Sandra took it. Therefore, when Chelsea realized that Mpho will be the one testing her, she knew she was going to pass the test because Mpho will favor her. Sandra made a few mistakes, she forgot to stop at the stop signs, but still she managed to pass the test because she and Mpho are doing favors for each other.

Being in a situation where paying a bribe is replaced by actually having a friend in the state institutions is not something one would expect from young students. But it is a situation that, in the end, is one not just of disgust and moral repugnance but of affective desire. It should then also not come as a surprise when my students, in a moment of great hilarity, shouted out to me, “Julia, you have to understand that we want the state to love us!”—meaning that they want a sense of being seen and taken care of, a cozy nestling into the protective arms of the state.

Conclusion

The previous section describes a spectrum of nuances and moral sensitivities of the new citizen-subjectivity that is being produced in the encounter with the state through the process of getting a driver’s license. They range from deep anger and shame to an experience of exhilaration and being loved. These are, in some way, hugely diverging reactions. What they have in common, however, is that they all involve a sense of transformation, brought about by the ritual form of what it takes to get a driver’s license. They also have in common that they are not necessarily based on the trajectory of the student’s parents
and the continuity of the moral sensibilities that the politico-material realities of the past historical context would allow them to develop. In other words, they are not necessarily racially determined, and they speak of new ways of belonging in South Africa. Most important, they show that immunity against corruption and the myth of meritocracy are not as easily upheld as they once were for the white middle class. For the black middle class, a newly gained sense of meritocracy, often instilled through the encouragement of their parents and the possibility of going to good schools, is brutally dampened. This seeking of professionalism, then, which I so clearly discerned in my students’ aspirations, does not stand a good chance against what the state makes them do to make their life happen. In frustrating them, the state produces friction. Yet friction is not necessarily an unproductive condition (Tsing 2005). In contrast, it can offer a new horizon of action in which being able to play the game comes with a vivacious sense of belonging for both black and white. Of course, not everybody has the kinds of relations that make a bribe unnecessary and sublimate the give-and-take exchange with the state into a form of rich social capital, especially not at this early age, when one is a student. But not having such relations does not mean that one is on higher moral ground. In contrast, this potentially manifests itself as mere lack or becomes an aspiration in itself. For such individuals, without being personally seen by the state, there is a clear sense of being left standing in the cold, and with their desire for the driver’s license and willingness to commit themselves to a complicity with the state, such individuals also experience a sense of life being stopped from happening. The model of the white father standing up to corruption pales against the jouissance and love of the new relationship with the state. The state’s (sometimes artificial, sometimes real) scarcity, on the one hand, and its broadened inclusiveness, on the other, produce a highly effective and in no way detached relationship to the state. It holds up a promise of special care.

At the same time, it can also produce a great sense of anger and outrage as old ways and new forms of entitlement to public goods are being forced into a pattern of selective personalized access. It appears to me that, in the case of young black people, especially those who clearly see their personal futures bound up with a progressive future of the country, such anger might be most likely to erupt and then most vehement when it does. Meanwhile, young white middle-class people who succumb to corruption without embracing the new challenge might enter a state similar to that of historical exhaustion, as their complicity in corruption becomes unavoidable but does not provide much sense of a shared future.

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Making Business Personal: Corruption, Anti-corruption, and Elite Networks in Post-Mao China

by John Osburg

This essay examines the unintended consequences of governance and economic reform efforts in post-Mao China through ethnographic examination of state audits, market reforms, and the recent anti-corruption campaign. I trace the evolution of elite networks composed of businesspeople and state officials that emerged from China’s economic reforms, and I argue that these networks constitute the social basis of “corruption” in post-Mao China. For the first few decades of the reform period (1978–present), these networks were forged through gendered forms of entertaining and gift exchange. However, as the first generation of post-Mao nouveaux riches have given rise to the second generation, this once rather permeable field of alliance building is becoming increasingly closed to the non-elite. By examining the formation and ethos of these networks, I demonstrate how logics of quantification and commensurability associated with capitalism often render particularistic ties rooted in kinship, affect, and pleasure all the more powerful and important to elite actors. My analysis serves to illustrate, more broadly, how systems designed with the purported aim of fostering accountability, efficiency, or fair competition can generate the opposite effects.

If the Communist Party doesn’t fight corruption, it will destroy China. But if it does fight corruption, it will be the end of the Communist Party. (Popular saying in the People’s Republic of China since the mid-1990s)

How does a state fight corruption in a context in which corrupt practices are not only ubiquitous but more or less institutionalized as the “unwritten” rules of the game? What are the meanings and effects of an anti-corruption campaign in a context in which virtually all state officials have engaged in illegal activity of varying degrees? Such questions have come to the fore since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) launched its largest crackdown on corruption and official ostentation in the post-Mao period (1978–present). Starting in early 2013 with a directive against official banqueting and extravagance, the campaign has brought down tens of thousands of officials from low-ranking “flies” to high-ranking “tigers” (to use the language of the campaign). To date, the largest “tiger” brought down includes a former Politburo Standing Committee member, Zhou Yongkang, and many members of his network, including other prominent officials and businessmen.

Unlike anti-corruption movements or discourses of “corruption” elsewhere, which are frequently employed by rival parties or grassroots organizations to question the legitimacy of a particular regime or political opponent, CCP anti-corruption efforts are conducted by its own internal committees, and thus the Party must maintain the delicate balance of convincingly combating corruption without undermining their own legitimacy—by inadvertently publically revealing the depth of their corruption. Because both the targets and agents of anti-corruption are ultimately part of the same organization, many China scholars and observers have tended to cynically view anti-corruption campaigns as manifestations of factional struggles: politically expedient means of purging rivals along with their networks. Thus, many have assumed that President Xi is using the guise of the anti-corruption campaign to remove political rivals and replace them with officials more personally loyal (Brown 2015) or even to facilitate the corrupt activities of his allies by removing competing factions from power (Murong Xuecun 2015).

Cris Shore’s essay (2018) highlights the “performativity” of anti-corruption, the ways in which auditing firms discursively produce the “problems” of fraud or corruption that they purport to be well-equipped to solve. The Chinese party-state’s
anti-corruption efforts underscore another dimension of this performativity: anti-corruption campaigns in China serve to figure the CCP as the primary (and only) agent capable of rooting out corruption even as it is also corruption’s primary source (see Hsu 2001). Through anti-corruption efforts, the CCP can enhance its legitimacy and appeal to the masses even as anti-corruption campaigns may be serving various “corrupt” agendas such as purging rival factions, appropriating resources for distribution to allies or family members, or, as in the audit example below, becoming key sites for hedonistic consumption for distribution to allies or family members, or, as in the audit example below, becoming key sites for hedonistic consumption and bribery. Just as audits or market-oriented reforms justified in the name of efficiency or performance enhancement can help facilitate the very phenomena they are supposed to eliminate (such as fraud or cronyism), the current anti-corruption campaign in China undermines certain forms of corruption, just as it enables, legitimates, and helps conceal others (see Pardo 2018).

This essay situates the recent anti-corruption campaign in a longer history of economic reforms during the post-Mao period (1978–present). I begin with an overview of the political and economic structures in post-Mao China through which illicit alliances and transactions flow. I then move from the macro level to the micro to explore the “corrupt” practices—bribery, entertaining, gift-giving, and so forth—through which elite networks are formed. This analysis is mostly based on ethnographic research I conducted with a group of businesspeople in the city of Chengdu beginning in the early 2000s. I trace how China’s economic reforms, which consisted of state retreat from large portions of the economy, created a context in which businesspeople and officials sought to embed new money-making opportunities in existing and emergent social and kinship networks, which have served as the “elementary structures” of corruption in China. Reforms that on the surface were meant to generate markets and rationalize economic decision-making did not result in an increasing “rationalization” or “disembedding” of economic activity from social relationships or state power, especially among the group in which one might most expect to find such a transformation—successful entrepreneurs. On the contrary, through ritualized entertaining, entrepreneurs actively sought (and in fact competed) to forge ties to state officials and to transform impersonal business relationships into ones rooted in affect (gānqìng) and interpersonal ethics (rénqìng). In an inverse of the cliche “Don’t take this personally; it’s just business,” the businessmen I knew strove ceaselessly to make business as personal as possible. As in many parts of the world, “corrupt” transactions and relationships in China are built through everyday forms of sociality—banqueting, drinking, gift exchange, and other forms of shared, gendered leisure (Hasty 2005; Olivier de Sardan 1999; Osburg 2013a). What makes the recent anti-corruption campaign unique is that not only are specific individuals targeted for investigation but the very forms of sociality that have enabled the formation of expansive networks comprising government bureaucracies, state-owned enterprises, private companies, and entrepreneurs have been hampered as well.

The final part of this essay examines recent changes in the practices of these networks brought on not only by Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign but also by changes in elite forms of sociality, leisure, and consumption. I offer some tentative thoughts on the effects of this campaign on class formation in post-Mao China. Rather than fostering clean and transparent government or market efficiency, I argue that the recent anti-corruption campaign’s primary effect has been, whether intended or not, class consolidation brought by pruning away those not sufficiently embedded in China’s elite networks. I hypothesize that, as China’s new rich gradually becomes a “class for itself,” embeddedness in elite networks is increasingly acquired by birth rather than cultivated in the nightclub. This marks a transition away from the forms of voluntary kinship that undergirded many state-business guanxi networks from the 1980s to the late 2000s.3

Socialist Audit Culture

China’s anti-corruption drive and its auditing practices more broadly offer illuminating cases to compare to liberal audit cultures that tend to prevail elsewhere. Unlike modes of anti-corruption rooted in liberal ideals promoted by institutions such as Transparency International and the International Monetary Fund, China’s audit culture stems from socialist ideologies of “scientific administration” that explicitly reject “foreign” (i.e., Western) notions of transparency as incompatible with China’s “national conditions,” an approach that Andrew Kipnis summarizes as “fighting corruption without encouraging bourgeois liberalization” (2008:277). In fact, grassroots anti-corruption activists in China, who have invoked liberal rhetorics of transparency and accountability in calling for CCP officials to make their personal assets public, have been detained in the anti-corruption campaign as well (see Jacobs 2013).

A key feature of CCP audit culture since the founding of the PRC has been the inspection tour (kāocha), in which the bureau or institution being evaluated hosts a team of senior officials undertaking the audit. These audits involve satisfying a checklist of factors—from production quotas to material evidence of ideological correctness—that can often be faked or staged (Kipnis 2008:278). For example, Andrew Kipnis notes how the Party’s vague criteria of “ideological construction,” which forms an important part of an official’s evaluation, might be measured by the number of political slogans on village walls, the number of subscriptions to party newspapers, or the number of ghostwritten essays on theoretical Marxism published (2008:278). Inspection tours often are accompanied

3. This is not meant to imply simple conversion from interest to affect but rather to show how both are often intertwined and mutually constitutive.

4. I use the term “voluntary kinship” rather than “fictive kinship” to avoid the implication that these ties are less “real” and enduring than kinship based on genetic relatedness.
by elaborate wining and dining of the auditors, which sometimes includes procuring sex workers for them as well (Uretsky 2016). Since these inspections are a primary component of cadres’ evaluations for promotions, the work of lower-level officials has become dominated by hosting inspections from above, consuming the majority of their time and energy and in one study resulting in “entertainment expenses” constituting the largest line item in a township’s budget (after salaries; Smith 2010:607). As Graeme Smith argues (2010), this results in a “hollow state” that offers few services to its citizens but produces one primary product for the benefit of higher levels of government: “audits” (Zhao 2007:73). Just as teachers in metric-obsessed schools “teach for the test,” local governments in China govern for audit—not simply by striving to achieve its formal metrics but also by adhering to the (often more important) unwritten rules that underwrite inspection visits. As a clear example of the “perverse effects” of audit culture identified by Shore and Wright (2015:426), the inspection tour/audit is arguably the primary source for the ostentatious orgies of drink, food, and sex first targeted in the 2013 anti-corruption campaign. While the inspections conducted by the CCP’s Discipline and Inspection Commission that have accompanied this campaign appear to be more austere (if not outright terror inducing), their routinization over time may generate a new set of unwritten rules to abide by.

Furthermore, because of the enshrinement of unwritten rules of bribery and entertaining as key to successful audits and advancement in officialdom, violations of party rules and state laws by officials in China clearly constitute the norm. This makes enforcement of formal rules and laws inevitably selective. Precisely because anyone can be found guilty of corruption, the unwritten rules and informal norms that might keep one in the good graces of the disciplinary inspection team—such as cultivating the protection of a high-ranking official, referred to as a “protective umbrella” (baohusan)—become all the more important. Alena Ledeneva summarizes a similar dynamic in the context of contemporary Russia: “The violation of unwritten rules can result in the enforcement of written ones, which paradoxically makes it just as, if not more, important to observe the unwritten rules as the written ones” (2006:13).

The Political Economy of Corruption in China

Since 2002, I have been conducting ongoing fieldwork with a group of wealthy entrepreneurs in the city of Chengdu in southwest China. The bulk of my fieldwork from 2002–2006 was spent accompanying these businessmen as they courted clients, partners, and government officials through drinking at banquets, singing in karaoke clubs (KTVs), carousing in nightclubs, and playing mahjong in teahouses. The patron-client relationships between state officials and businesspeople in China are a significant subset of the broader phenomenon of guanxi, the web of social connections through which people in greater China exchange favors, from the mundane to the fortune-making (Gold, Guthrie, Wank 2002; Yan 1996, 2003; Yang 1994, 2002). Despite the dramatic transformation in China’s economy brought by ongoing economic reforms, state agents still largely control access to capital, business licenses, and land. Beyond state control of key aspects of the economy, in many industries strong ties to the party-state offer one a huge competitive advantage. Well-connected entrepreneurs are more likely to win government contracts; obtain tax breaks, insider information, and regulatory flexibility; and gain privileged access to China’s most valuable state-controlled commodity, land (Kim 2013; Liu 2002; Piek 1995; Smart 1993; Wank 1999). And in some instances entrepreneurs are able to appropriate state power to punish their competitors and advance their interests, a phenomenon David Wank dubs “local state takeover” (2009). While some scholars predicted increasing antagonism between the emergent class of entrepreneurs and the established political elite, others have clearly shown that the relationship between officials and businessmen is better characterized as “symbiotic” (Solinger 1992:129) or “symbiotic clientelism” (Wank 1999:11): entrepreneurs obtain protection and many benefits that enhance their business success, while state agents both generate revenue for local government agencies and obtain illicit income for themselves through bribes or kickbacks that often dwarf their official salaries. By distributing favors, privileges, contracts, and protection, officials are also able to build their own networks of entrepreneurs to accomplish various projects, from personal status and pleasure to state-driven goals of economic development. This intertwining of businesspeople with state officials has defied dominant liberal narratives of China’s political evolution, which imagined that the new bourgeoisie would overturn China’s Leninist political system by demanding rule of law and property rights to protect their newfound wealth.

Most scholars divide corruption in post-Mao China into two forms, corresponding to two different periods in China’s economic reforms (e.g., Smart 2010; Sun 2004). In an early assessment of the effects of corruption during the reform period, Rocca distinguished between “creative” forms of corruption that enabled the empowerment and mobility of new social classes (such as the newly emerging entrepreneurs) and “predatory” forms that primarily served to maintain the power of the communist bureaucracy (1992:403–404).5 During the early reform period (1978–1992), corruption in the form of illicit ties and transactions between entrepreneurs and state officials is viewed by most scholars as serving to grease the wheels of a communist bureaucracy still reluctant to sanction capitalist activity, both for reasons of ideology and political survival. During this period, guanxi ties cultivated through

5. This distinction between “creative” and “predatory” forms of corruption is somewhat difficult to uphold diachronically, however. Networks that helped enable business activities to emerge in the early reform period in many cases evolved into “predatory,” monopolistic vested interests that dominated portions of the economy in subsequent decades. See also n. 15 below.
through the timely acquisition of shares in companies prior to the ending company structures) in return. Beginning in the early 2000s, newly publicly traded companies (often through byzantine holding and assets, either receiving bribes or shares in newly formed or fortunes by serving as brokers for access to state-controlled land

Many officials, along with their friends and families, were able to obtain ownership or shares in these assets cheaply through back door means, sometimes referred to as “insider privatization.” Managers of state-run companies often employed complex techniques of asset stripping, in which they made deals that benefited private firms owned by family and friends but often bankrupted the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) they controlled (see Ding 2000 for examples). During this period some family members of high-ranking officials amassed huge fortunes by serving as brokers for access to state-controlled land and assets, either receiving bribes or shares in newly formed or newly publicly traded companies (often through byzantine holding company structures) in return. Beginning in the early 2000s, the officially connected were able to acquire windfall profits through the timely acquisition of shares in companies prior to their IPOs. In some cases these shares were gifted to elite connected family members or sold cheaply to them by companies hoping to speed up the arduous process of becoming a listed company or, simply, to curry favor with political elites (Kroeker 2016:204).

Despite ever-increasing levels of corruption, from 1992 to 2008 China’s economy underwent a historically unprecedented expansion, sustaining double-digit rates of growth nearly every year. This combination of high levels of “predatory” corruption along with high levels of economic growth defies the logic of conventional economic models that presume that predatory corruption is a drag on growth. Andrew Wedeman dubs this the “double paradox” of Chinese corruption (2012). China also departs from conventional models of “developing world” corruption in the relative absence of petty bureaucratic corruption (cf. Gupta 2012 and Smith 2007). Bribes and connections are not necessary to accomplish most basic bureaucratic tasks such as acquiring a driver’s license or a small business permit (although they are sometimes used to speed up the process). While the police are intertwined with the underground economy in most Chinese cities, they rarely harass or demand bribes of ordinary law-abiding citizens. Thus, while ordinary Chinese frequently use guanxi ties to accomplish various tasks such as securing a bed at a top hospital for a sick family member or finding a job for a relative, corruption in the popular imagination is largely associated with the business and political elite. Despite their validation by the party-state and celebration in the popular media, the first generation of wealthy entrepreneurs spawned by China’s post-Mao economic boom are widely viewed as corrupt and uncouth. Because their fortunes are perceived to have been obtained through immoral or illegal means, often involving the patronage of government officials, their business acumen and ability are widely derided as well (Osburg 2013a).

Despite China’s economic reforms, the state still controls large sectors of the economy (including banking, telecommunications, and energy). State promotion of large infrastructure projects (such as highways, airports, and high-speed rail) serves several purposes for the party-state: it creates revenue for local governments that can be used to fund other projects; it boosts economic growth rates and employment that are key factors in officials’ assessments for promotion; it provides the illicit gray income officials use to maintain a lifestyle commensurate with their status; and it generates (at least in the short-term) windfall profits for the connected. Officials caught in anti-corruption investigations often defend themselves by claiming that they could not advance their careers and further economic growth in their regions without accepting bribes from entrepreneurs, giving kickbacks to their superiors, and doing favors for their kin and guanxi networks. In fact, many observers have pointed

6. See the example of Lai Changxing discussed below.

7. See the example of then Premier Wen Jiabao’s family fortune documented in Barboza (2012).

8. See Osburg (2013b) and Osnos (2012) for further discussion of China’s project-based economy.
the state security apparatus. Despite their diverse backgrounds, urban officials with rural entrepreneurs, gangster bosses with officials fear embarking on new projects or initiatives for the attention they might attract. Many have opted for the safest route of lying low and doing nothing, which many observers fear will further dampen China’s currently slowing economy.

I recount this brief overview of China’s post-Mao economy to counter the narrative of a depersonalized market magically filling the gap left by a retreating state. Market reforms in China, rather than simply freeing economic activity from state control, instead created a context in which economic actors sought to embed new opportunities into existing and emergent sociopolitical networks, networks that often utilized state power to their advantage. Furthermore, by underscoring the heavy state role in the economy, I do not intend to suggest that should the state retreat from the economy, corruption and guanxi ties would go away. Rather I hope to show why ties to the party-state are a particularly important and powerful means of generating wealth in China, even in industries largely free of state control. In making this point, however, I am not arguing for a distinctively Chinese “guanxi capitalism” rooted in relationships, social norms, and affect set in opposition to an individualistic, rational, and law-governed Western capitalism. While ideologically derived versions of the economy imagine such a world, actually existing capitalism in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere is too embedded in complex social networks governed by culturally particular norms and sentiments and often equally entangled with the state, albeit in different ways. Thus, China’s “double paradox”—high levels of corruption and high growth—only appears paradoxical from a particular understanding of the economy in which depersonalized market forces inherently foster efficiency and in which “nonmarket ties” serve as a drag.

“How a Revolution Becomes a Dinner Party”: Entertaining, Emotional Labor, and the Elementary Structures of Corruption in Post-Mao China

The networks of entrepreneurs and officials with whom I conducted my research were deeply intertwined financially and socially. They were shareholders in each other’s companies and purchased each other’s products and services. They exchanged information, offered advice, provided both material and non-material assistance, and served as intermediaries in bringing together business partners, introducing clients, and soliciting patrons in the government. New business opportunities often brought together people from very different backgrounds—urban officials with rural entrepreneurs, gangster bosses with the state security apparatus. Despite their diverse backgrounds, the entrepreneurs and government officials I knew aspired to a similar masculine “boss-patron” ideal—a dispenser of favors and opportunities, someone who could command the assistance of powerful individuals with just a phone call (or, as is more common these days, a WeChat message). I argue that participation in these networks as both patron and client is fundamental to post-Mao configurations of masculinity, in which career success and expansive social networks serve as the dominant measures of a man’s worth (Osburg 2013a).

The networks built by my interlocutors exerted a profound effect on their business ventures, interpersonal ethics, and consumption habits. Although some of these networks were based on ties of kinship, colleagueship, and native place, the bulk of the relationships that made up these networks were forged and maintained through ritualized leisure referred to as yingchou—experiences of shared pleasure in entertainment venues catering to the desires of elite men. One moderately successful businessman that I came to know quite well estimated (in 2008) that he spent 2–3 million RMB (between US$300,000 and US$450,000) a year in one particular nightclub entertaining business associates, government officials, and friends, and given that his bill often exceeded RMB 10,000 in a single evening, I believe his estimate. These networks were primarily composed of men and forged through highly gendered practices, such as drinking at banquets, carousing in nightclubs, and group visits to brothels and saunas. Among the entrepreneurs with whom I worked, business relationships were often couched in rhetorics of male solidarity, brotherhood, paternalism, mutual aid, and yiqi (honor or a sense of obligation in personal relationships). Patrons and well-connected bosses were often referred to as “big brothers” (dage), and their status depended on fulfilling paternalist obligations and providing for the well-being of the other members of their networks. They were expected to put their brotherly relationships above all other commitments, sharing their success and using positions of power to the advantage of their associates. While these networks are oriented toward profit and career advancement, internally they are governed by a moral economy of distribution in which boss-patrons accrue status by dispensing opportunities to dependents in their networks (see Osburg 2013a, chap. 3).

In a context in which relatives of China’s political elite are granted insider access by birth, the businessmen with whom I worked competed and labored to cultivate their own privileged networks by courting government officials through gifts, banquets, and group carousing. My research subjects and I spent most nights and many afternoons in these venues cultivating


10. This incessant, obligatory, and increasingly routinized yingchou constitutes what I have come to think of (with apologies to Weber) as the “iron cage of entertaining” in China.

11. Global investment banks, rather than engaging in this difficult work themselves, prefer to hire the son or daughter of a high-ranking official to help them broker deals. This practice, referred to as a “relationship hire” by some banks, has recently brought them under legal scrutiny in the United States. (See Protess and Silver-Greenberg 2016.)
business ties or maintaining existing ones. I argue that we should view these techniques of "embedding" as a form of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983). Due to Western ideological constructs that equate emotion work with femininity (and thereby devalue it), such interactions tend to be casually dismissed as "male bonding" or "networking" in the West. At best they are viewed as supplements to the "real work" of business. The businessmen I knew, however, viewed these techniques not as peripheral to but as the work of business. They employed various performative techniques—involving kinship idioms, engaging in subtle forms of flattery, singing in karaoke clubs, taking group trips to brothels, providing introductions to mistresses, etc.—to "condition" the subjective states of their clients, partners, or official patrons (Schneider and Schneider 2003:118). In these contexts, actors performatively invoked cultural notions of brotherhood or yiqi (honor in interpersonal relationships), sometimes sincerely, other times in highly calculated, instrumental ways. Sometimes these techniques generated their intended performative effects; other times they failed.

Many scholars both within and outside of China have described these informal networks of officials and businessmen in terms of the "privatization of the state" or in "transactions in money for power" (qianquan jiaoyi) (e.g., Sun 2004). Others have interpreted them in largely functionalist terms, arguing that fostering these durable relationships of trust is necessary to secure contracts in the absence of a robust legal infrastructure and a predatory state (Wank 1999; Zheng 2006). I argue that to view these relationships as merely transactional or their entertaining rituals as primarily functional is to misconstrue their nature. Entertaining is understood by its participants as (not always successful) attempts to engender subjective transformations, to inject forms of value resistant to commodification and commensurability into business relationships, and to transform relationships of cold calculation into particularistic relationships bound by, in the words of my informants, "sentiment" (ganqing). This is achieved through the incommensurable, shared experiences of intimacy, vulnerability, pleasure, and complicity (Steinmüller 2010) that elite business entertaining enables but does not always achieve. The entrepreneurs I knew hoped that by paying for an evening on the town, their client or official patron would walk away not simply feeling "indebted" to their host for his lavish expenditure but rather with an embodied memory of shared pleasure and a latent sense of fondness for their host, rendering them less likely to be courted away by a business rival.

My informants viewed these techniques of conditioning as necessary for two reasons. One was the ubiquity of bribery. Because anyone can offer a bribe or a kickback, cash and luxury gifts by themselves were not particularly effective in forging ties: as commodities their value was transparent and comparable with other commodities. One runs the risk that someone else's bribe will be higher or that their gift will be legibly more valuable. Thus, my informants attempted to marshal these objects to generate incommensurable ties rooted in affective, embodied memories. The second reason that necessitated this conditioning was that many of my businessman informants were competing against those who were already embedded in elite networks through kin ties: the children, spouses, and relatives of government officials who were at a distinct advantage in almost all areas of business. My informants could only hope that through their courtship techniques they could progress (in the words of one entrepreneur) "from acquaintances to friends and from friends to 'iron-clad brothers' (tiegemen's)" and thus create their own voluntary kinship networks that (ideally) linked up with those of the elite.

12. I borrow the term "condition" from Jane Schneider and Peter Schneider's description of Sicilian Mafia practices as a gloss for the Sichuan dialect term goudui (勾兑). The Schneiders describe how the Sicilian Mafia strove to create "many stranded relationships of intertwined interest and affect" that transcend "quid pro quo exchanges" (2003:123). This nicely captures the key element of goudui: one does not simply want to create a relationship of indebtedness in one's guest but rather to render one's relationship "thick" and imbued with affect. See also Zhang (2001).

13. I refer to these utterances as performative to avoid the simple assumption that declarations such as "We're brothers for life" (xiangdidi yibeizi) are simply unmediated reflections of a subjective state (Yurchak 2006:21–29). Rather, these declarations were uttered in order to foster particular performative effects: primarily to establish a new moral framework for the relationship. Or, in the case of businessmen's self-narratives, they served to frame their own actions as guided by morality and sentiment rather than self-interest. When the conditions for these performative utterances were less than ideal, such as when the interested nature of a supplicant was too apparent or when the promised effervescence of nightlife carousing failed to materialize, they often failed to achieve their performative effects.

14. See also Smart and Hsu's (2007) discussion of the importance of "social tact" in both framing and determining the success or failure of various illicit transactions.

15. Interpreting these networks in purely functionalist terms is to cast what are often monopolistic, predatory networks in a rather benign light. Embedding business ties in social norms and relationships is not simply a means of enabling commerce to function "as usual" in an uncertain political environment; it is also a means of gaining predatory advantage by appropriating state power to punish or limit competitors. See also Smart (1999:114–115) for critique of both functionalist analyses that presume corruption to be primarily "productive" and accounts that only see corruption as unproductive rent seeking. Smart emphasizes the potential for corruption to generate different social outcomes.

16. It is tempting to view these practices in Bourdieusian terms as well: as conversions of economic capital into social capital or vice versa (Bourdieu 1987 [1979]). However, closer examination reveals some limitations of the capital metaphor. First, these "conversions" frequently fail: one form of capital does not automatically or seamlessly convert into another (Smart 1993). More significant, however, is that the goal of these practices is the creation of inalienable, incommensurable forms of value: ties that will not be dissolved by another's bribe, gifts that will not simply be regretted or cashed in. It is precisely the potential commensurability between economic and social capital that my informants hoped to overcome through their endless nights of entertaining.
Despite their origins in profit seeking, over time the moral economies of these networks generated a powerful set of obligations. My informants came to derive their sense of self, status, and honor from fulfilling obligations to their business associates and official patrons and, given their long absences from home, were far more emotionally invested in them than in their families. Maintaining their status and recognition in these networks through exchanging favors, distributing opportunities, and extravagant carousing served as the animating force of their capital accumulation as much as (if not more than) any monolithic drive for profit.

Increasing competition brought by China’s economic growth has made courting ties to the state more important, not less. Contrary to economic imaginaries that see dense, “corrupt” ties between businesspeople and state officials as an inefficiency whose importance will be eroded by deepening marketization, my informants viewed them as essential to enhancing their competitiveness, providing both protection and a potential weapon to be used against competitors. Unlike the investment bankers and analysts studied by Karen Ho (2009), who identify with the market and invoke market ideology to explain business deals and transactions, my informants presumed the embeddedness of virtually all business in China in dense social and kin relationships. Promotions, contracts, and land deals were frequently explained in terms of relationships and insider access. Rather than invoking abstract market forces, my informants pointed to specific relationships or to particular state actors to explain sudden shifts in financial winds. They often contrasted China with an idealized West where they imagined a true meritocratic market to function, in which talent and ability mattered more than relationships.17 In his account of business in late-1990s Beihai, China, Xin Liu provides a particularly apt ethnographic illustration of this point: the entrepreneurs he studied used the term “invisible hands” to reference not the market metaphor made famous by Adam Smith but the massage girls who serviced their clients and official patrons (2002:48) and ultimately helped to cement their deals.

From “Brothers” to “Aristocrats”: Emerging Distinctions among the Elite

In 2010, 2013, and 2014 I returned to China to meet up with entrepreneurs whom I had met 10 years earlier. In the past, the businessmen I knew would often cite guanxi ties as the foundation of their success, claiming that the right relationship could compensate for deficiencies in their ability and experience. They expressed faith in the notion that a well-placed connection would ensure success and often boasted of their abilities to court ties with powerful officials. In my more recent visits with entrepreneurs, however, they depicted guanxi as a less pervasive force than in the past. The seemingly open-ended realm of deal making and network building in which, through the right combination of charisma and alcohol tolerance, seemingly anyone could amass a fortune, had been replaced by a sense of being constrained by a new set of political, economic, and social realities. They often complained that despite their efforts to cultivate powerful ties to protect their businesses and facilitate their expansion, their growth was ultimately limited by those with already established guanxi. They also often contrasted their own guanxi—ties formed through many years of liver-destroying effort—with that possessed by the close friends and relatives of the political elite, which they referred to as beijing (literally, “background”).18

One successful salesman in IT, whom I met 13 years ago when he was still a university student, summarized this sentiment. Despite being from a poor village outside of Chengdu, he had tested into a key high school in his county and then attended one of the top universities in Sichuan province. By his late twenties, he owned a centrally located apartment in Chengdu and a 5 Series BMW and had traveled abroad several times. When I pointed out how well he had done, he still expressed frustration:

I’ve done ok, but there’s still so much I want to do. Look at my parents; they’re still living in a small apartment back in my hometown. I want to buy them an apartment in Chengdu. I want to do more to help out my friends and family, but there’s only so much that I can do. I have lots of ideas, but [since] I don’t have beijing (strong family connections), there’s no way for me to realize them.

He described his line of work as relatively “healthy” (jiankang), in that he did not have to provide many kickbacks, and the entertaining of his clients, while mandatory and time consuming, was not excessive, in his estimation. However, since many of his clients were State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), universities, and other government units, he expressed considerable frustration about how the superior connections of his competitors undermined his ability to compete. He gave an example of how a successful bid from his company was suddenly rejected before they could sign the sales contract in favor of that of a different company. He interpreted this chain of events as follows: “Some lingdao (leader) must’ve decided that the contract needed to go to that company, no doubt because of someone’s guanxi. Everyone knows that company’s products are worse in quality and their prices are more expensive.”

While guanxi continues to be important, the ways in which it is cultivated and employed have undergone some key changes in the past decade or so, the most significant being the decline of the entertaining practices described in the previous section.

17. This particular idealized understanding of “the West” was a major reason my wealth informants cited for sending their children to the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia for their college educations and to begin their careers.

18. More specifically, beijing (背景) refers to kinship ties (or very deep friendships) to powerful levels of the party-state.
Among the cohort of businessmen I met 10 years ago, a key factor in this decline is a growing aversion to the mental and physical toll of excessive eating and drinking. As they approached their late 40s and early 50s, many of my informants’ bodies simply could not tolerate the constant drinking associated with yingchou. Some had even developed chronic illnesses or drug and alcohol addictions. Even those who had managed to avoid serious health problems had grown tired of the time investment required by business-related entertaining. They complained that their endless social obligations to business associates, government officials, and other members of their social networks prevented them from pursuing their own business and leisure interests. Several explained to me that successful wealthy individuals in particular are forced to “live for others” (weiberein shenghuo) rather than for themselves. Many in fact wished they could just give a bribe or a kickback to cement a deal. But my informants stressed that often guanxi was the precondition for giving a bribe in the first place. Others pointed out that anyone can offer a bribe or kickback. Thus only those who, in addition to money, can offer the trust, familiarity, and durability that accompanies guanxi were at a distinct advantage. In order to avoid these obligations, some of the more successful entrepreneurs I knew had simply retreated from their social networks in the only socially acceptable way: by emigrating to Australia, Canada, or the United States.

My previous research uncovered a fair amount of uniformity in techniques of guanxi cultivation. The dominant forms were banqueting, karaoke, drinking, and patronizing saunas and brothels. While establishments varied considerably in their price and extravagance, the practices and idioms that accompanied this entertaining were part of a transclass and transregional masculine culture of entertaining. Its basic forms and etiquette were familiar to peasant farmers and high-ranking officials alike. Through such techniques, businessmen (and, in some instances, businesswomen) of humble means were able to cultivate the patronage of some of China’s most powerful high-ranking officials. Perhaps the most famous example is that of the Fujianese tycoon Lai Changxing, who came from a poor rural village but was able to coopt the entire customs administration and a good portion of the provincial government of Fujian province. The Fujian customs house essentially functioned as an extension of Lai’s firm, allowing his company’s goods to enter the country untaxed while taxing those of his competitors (Wank 2009). He famously built a private club known as the Red Mansion (Hong-lou), where he entertained government officials with banquets, karaoke, and an on-site brothel (see August 2007). In Sichuan, where I conducted my research, the gangster-businessman Liu Han, the son of a teacher and a street vendor, built a multibillion dollar mining and energy conglomerate due to ties he cultivated with the son of Zhou Yongkang, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee.20

However, as China’s first generation of wealth has given rise to the second generation, new practices and venues for guanxi cultivation have emerged that are inaccessible to those not in the know or possessing the right family background. Private clubs that charge exorbitant membership fees and require extensive background checks have emerged as the favored entertaining places among the wealthy. These clubs ensure that members only mingle with others from similar socioeconomic and political backgrounds. Golf clubs and auto clubs, which require wealth, social ties, and forms of cultural capital to enter, have also become significant venues for networking with other members of the elite. In other words, elite guanxi cultivation is starting to diverge from the shared forms of the 1990s and early 2000s as the lines separating China’s emerging social classes become more well defined.

While the first generation of successful post-Mao entrepreneurs often benefited from already-existing guanxi from school and work ties, many also built expansive social networks from scratch as their businesses expanded. The second generation rich (fu’erdai) and their official counterparts (guan’erdaidai and taizidang or hong’erdaidai), however, have been able to benefit from guanxi inherited by their parents. For them, guanxi is less something that is achieved, experienced, and often embodied in actual relationships than something that functions as a pure form of social capital that can be exchanged for jobs, business opportunities, and official positions. Popular representations of the fu’erdai often emphasize their tightly knit, closed social circles.21

On my most recent visit to China, I was introduced to the son of a local official, who I was hoping would help introduce me to affluent followers of Tibetan Buddhism for a new project I had begun. It turned out that he did not know many Buddhists, but he was eager to introduce me to his circle of young, wealthy friends. When we first met, I had casually mentioned to him that my mother works for a city government in the United States. When he took me out to a wine bar to meet some of his fu’erdai friends, I was surprised to be introduced to the group as an “American guan’erdaidai” (offspring of a government official). From my experiences with this group, it quickly became apparent that family background was now scrutinized in a way that was nonexistent in the 1990s, when by default the wealthy were all nouveau riche. This inherited guanxi coupled with the rise of class-specific guanxi cultivation...
viation practices will serve to exclude those not born into China’s second-generation rich.

Anti-corruption as Class Consolidation?

When I returned to Chengdu in the summer of 2014, many of the entertaining practices I observed on previous trips were in dramatic decline as a result of the anti-corruption campaign launched a little more than a year earlier. Xi’s attempts to curb official ostentation and excess, encapsulated by the “four dishes and a soup” policy for official meals, had made government officials terrified of accepting dinner invitations and gifts from entrepreneurs. Many of the nightlife establishments I had frequented with my informant-friends in the past had closed down or scaled down their operations significantly. The most popular restaurant chain for courting clients and officials, which at its peak had six successful branches in Chengdu, was now down to one, and the owner was said to be hiding out in Australia. Also noticeably absent were the luxury cars with government, military, and police license plates that exempted them from most parking and traffic regulations. While some of these officially licensed luxury cars were purchased by government and police units for use by high-level officials, many were private cars whose owners had obtained these special license plates through backdoor connections. Virtually all visible symbols of official excess and corruption were now absent from public view.

Several of my informant-friends who had relied on government-controlled contracts and insider access for the bulk of their business were seriously struggling as a result of the campaign. One businessman, Mr. Wei, who made his fortune with contracts to demolish old neighborhoods of Chengdu marked to be replaced by new high-rises, serves as a good illustration of the dramatic effects of this campaign. At dinner one evening he recounted to me how officials began returning gifts and payments he had previously made to them as the crackdown got under way, and he pondered what to do with his growing collection of gently used luxury watches given back to him by officials. He casually mentioned that he himself had been detained by anti-corruption investigators (jiwei) twice in the past 6 months but claimed that he refused to provide them with any information. While in the past he was out entertaining at least five nights a week, he now often spends his evenings at home and has even taken up cooking Western cuisine as a hobby, posting sad photos of sandwiches and pasta dishes on WeChat. Because of his financial struggles, he fired his chauffeur and started taking the subway.

Unable to cultivate and maintain relationships with officials, businessmen like Mr. Wei see themselves as increasingly closed off from elite networks. They complain that only those with the most durable form of guanxi—beijing (kinship ties to the political elite, not to mention the political elite themselves)—can still prosper in the current climate. He emphasized that the anti-corruption campaign has been successful in stopping the flow of bribes to officials, which he viewed as ultimately good for China. But he pointed out that it has been completely ineffective at curbing the privileges of the political elite and their families. In fact, he claimed it is made it easier for them, since they can effectively monopolize state-controlled deals and industries. As a result of the kin ties they have acquired through birth or marriage, they do not need to engage in (visible and traceable) forms of emotional labor and gift exchange to generate guanxi ties; their family backgrounds ensure access to deals as well as protection. Even relatively well-connected and successful entrepreneurs like Mr. Wei are now effectively shut out from the spoils of the state-controlled growth.

Furthermore, several observers have pointed out that among the “tigers” investigated in the anti-corruption campaign, none (as of 2016) have been members of the so-called red second-generation (hong’erdai), the children of founding/early members of the Communist Party and People’s Republic, also sometimes referred to as “princelings” (taizidang). Unlike “commoner” (pingmin) officials from humble backgrounds, who have to trade favors, give bribes, and get their hands dirty to advance their careers, princelings are able to simply trade on their family name to amass wealth and win promotions. Some princelings themselves have even publicly stated that they are less corrupt due to the tradition (referred to by one princeling as the “red gene” hongse jiyin) they inherited from their parents of “frugality” and “placing the people and the nation above all” (quoted in Barme 2014). Xi Jinping, himself a member of the red second-generation, has been rumored to refer to party elites who are not direct descendants of revolutionary martyrs or founding party members as “shopkeepers’ sons” who are not entitled to rule the PRC (Kuo and Rovnick 2012).

Ordinary Chinese frequently refer to the ruling elites and their families as nobility (guizu), and this term is becoming an increasingly apt characterization of the kin-based nature of power in China. The market reforms of the 1980s and 1990s enabled dramatic upward mobility for a small minority. Many of these individuals were able to cultivate ties to the political elite (at local, provincial, or national levels) through corrupt practices. One consequence of the anti-corruption campaign, whether intended or not, is that entrepreneurs of humble origin can no longer cultivate (or buy) their way into the system. If the result of the anti-corruption campaign were somehow more transparency and fairer competition, this would perhaps be a positive outcome. However, if the grumblings of the businessmen of Chengdu are to be taken seriously (not to mention the seeming immunity of princelings in the anti-corruption campaign), this campaign has yielded a context in which family background has become an even more significant determinant of economic success and political survival. The combined effect of the anti-corruption campaign and the rise of the second generations of wealth and officialdom is that guanxi networks will become more rigid and closed over the coming years. Given the advantages conferred by birth into a family with beijing or even by being simply born into the fu’erdai class, perhaps in the future the meaning of the Chinese term guizu will narrow to signify not just a wealthy elite but a class very closely resembling an actual aristocracy. This narrowing of the elite, however, has...
the potential to generate resentment among wealthy entrepreneurs who benefited from 3 decades of corruption and within the party-state perhaps may embolden the resistance of rival factions.

Conclusion: Unintended Consequences and Perverse Effects

In conclusion, I would like to highlight some ways in which the dynamics of both corruption and anti-corruption in post-Mao China challenge the prevailing assumptions that undergird much global anti-corruption discourse. In the case of post-Mao China, guanxi networks, which some scholars dismissed as an inefficient, “corrupt” relic of socialism doomed to be swept away by greater market competition (Guthrie 1998), not only persisted but became more important for business success as privatization deepened (Yang 2002). Rather than engendering the disemb遵循ing and rationalization that market liberalization purports to foster, it rendered noncommensurable logics of pleasure, sentiment, and kinship both more important and more powerful. The affective, particularistic, “non-rational” ties they cultivated became valuable precisely because of the threats posed by fierce competition and ubiquitous bribery that lured away clients, partners, and patrons. While aspects of these networks are products of the specific features of China’s state-dominated capitalism, the core practice—transforming ostensible market relationships into embedded social relationships—is no doubt a core component (if not the core component) of business practice everywhere.

Anthropologists have tended to focus ethnographic attention on the violence wrought by the abstraction, commensuration, and quantification that results from capitalist logics and financial technologies encountering other social relations and systems of value among the marginalized, I contend that anthropologists should also be attentive to the mirror image processes—of re-embedding and incommensuration—that happen among the powerful. In a context in which audit technologies of quantification and financialization penetrate further into all aspects of life, power and privilege often derive from realms of incommensurability based on notions of shared blood, affective ties, or ideologies of class or gender-based solidarity. What is interesting, but perhaps not unique, about the businessmen with whom I worked was the extent to which these particularistic networks were consciously cultivated rather than organically acquired through birth or education. Such modes of particularism, which tend to be viewed as the primordial other of capitalist modernity, in some contexts are better understood as its disavowed offspring. Techniques of “re-embedding,” such as those described in this essay, enable privileged actors to operate above the fray of calculation, to appropriate technologies of audit and quantification for their own group’s benefit, or to give a scientific sheen of legitimacy to ongoing nepotism and cronysm.

Second, China’s own history of governance audits suggests that such techniques are not a unique product of neoliberal discourses (Kipnis 2008), and their institutionalization over time nicely illustrates the “perverse effects” of audit culture (Shore and Wright 2015). Party-state audit practices not only undermined the “effective governance” they were supposed to measure but became a mechanism for institutionalizing a set of unwritten rules of entertaining: they generated a “shadow audit” of food, drink, and sex judged primarily by bodily pleasure, which gradually came to outweigh the official one. The current anti-corruption campaign, however, does seem to diverge from this audit culture not only in scale and duration but also in that the formerly institutionalized unwritten rules of wining and dining no longer seem to apply. But the opacity of the organization leading it, the CCP’s Discipline and Inspection Commission (jiwei jiancha weiyuanhui), has rendered the campaign a black box for China observers and ordinary citizens alike. The past history of politically motivated purges and the unevenness of the current campaign’s enforcement enable the projection of all sorts of “corrupt” motives onto anti-corruption efforts. No one knows for certain (including party cadres and state bureaucrats themselves) if officials are being punished for the violation of formal laws or unwritten norms. Thus, this dynamic parallels what Jane Schneider describes in her essay (2018) as the Mafia-like characteristics of the anti-Mafia in Sicily: how anti-corruption, because of its exceptional nature, can quite easily resemble or even evolve into the very formation it seeks to combat. I was reminded of this as I headed to dinner during the height of the anti-corruption campaign in Chengdu with a businessman friend and his girlfriend, who was driving. When we arrived at the restaurant she proceeded to park (quite illegally) on the sidewalk. When I inquired if it was okay to park there, my friend explained on behalf of his girlfriend, “It’s not a problem. She works for the jiewei (the CCP’s anti-corruption committee). Everyone’s afraid of them. No one will give her a ticket!”

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Care and Suspicion
Corruption as Definition in Humanitarian Relations

by Ilana Feldman

Despite the ubiquity of humanitarian language, action, and sentiment in our current world, there has been no consensus on the precise definition of humanitarianism. Humanitarian obligations, jurisdiction, limits, and even actors remain unsettled and often hotly contested. Suspicions about motives and probity, often articulated through the language of corruption, play a key role in these contests. Through a consideration of humanitarian assistance to Palestinian refugees, this essay advances several related arguments about how corruption operates in humanitarianism.

Most broadly, suspicions and accusations of corruption play an important role in the on-the-ground work of defining what humanitarianism is for providers and recipients. They do so, in part, through (1) establishing and elaborating the refugee as a category of humanitarian governance and personhood and (2) articulating and consolidating an array of obligations and responsibilities across the humanitarian field. Viewed through the lens of concerns about corruption, refugees appear as ethically comprised subjects not because of their inherent qualities but due to their circumstances. Humanitarian governance responds in various ways to this perceived incapacity.

The humanitarian orientation toward people who need assistance is meant to be one of care and concern, and to a considerable degree it is. At the same time, limits in humanitarian capacity, resources, and finances often necessitate strict boundaries on eligibility for aid. These boundaries mean that this orientation also has to be one of suspicion and distrust. Providers of humanitarian aid are compelled to root out fraud, duplicity, and misuse of resources among recipients (Daniel and Knudsen 1995; Fassin and D’Halluin 2005). And it is not only providers who express suspicion. Recipients of humanitarian aid are acutely attentive to misappropriation, favoritism, and partiality among providers (Ewins et al. 2006; Vestergaard 2014). Such expressions of distrust by refugees and aid providers help shape the material, conceptual, and affective landscape of humanitarian relations (Daniel and Knudsen 1995).

I argue here that all of these forms of wrongdoing are treated as instances of corruption. Corruption is often thought of as a failure of public institutions to follow law and procedure because of the pursuit of private gain and advantage. Such corruption requires willing (eager?) individual participants, but it is the institutional failure or deceit that is deemed to be the core of the problem. Thus, the corruption label seems to attach more readily to organizations (whether a state, private, or international agency) charged with a public responsibility than to aid recipients (whether refugees or impoverished citizens) who are private subjects. In effect, however, by virtue of their need and their acceptance of assistance, aid recipients are deprived of the opportunity to remain wholly private. Their behavior is deemed a matter of considerable public concern and, even if it does not fit the lexicon of institutions like Transparency International, is viewed by humanitarian aid providers as potentially corrupt. That corruption is understood as attributable to all actors in a humanitarian system directly affects how people evaluate each other. It also means that suspicion is endemic to the system.

Anthropologists have opened up a broad conceptual terrain for thinking about the meaning, boundaries, and effects of corruption, particularly in the domain of the state and government-citizen relations (Gupta 2012; Hetherington 2011; Pierce 2016; Smith 2007). The field of humanitarian relations bears important similarities with that of state relations, particularly with respect to concerns about welfare provision and recipients. In humanitarian contexts, corruption suspicions and accusations serve as a lens through which providers and refugees understand each other, a terrain on which they interact, and a vector for the forwarding of claims and complaints.
among multiple actors. Furthermore, the differently articulated definitions of corruption and the mechanisms to manage and combat it that emerge from these articulations are also crucial in defining what humanitarianism is for the various actors in its dynamic.

This essay takes humanitarian assistance to Palestinian refugees as its case. It draws on fieldwork conducted over many years in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, and the West Bank and archival research documenting the long Palestinian experience of aid and displacement, and it also includes material on Syria and the Gaza Strip. Accusations of corruption involve charges about both personal character and systemic orientation. Concerns about corruption ensure that suspicion, distance, and distrust are central to the humanitarian dynamic. In this essay, I work to identify both some of what corruption is (the constellation of practices that are so named) and some of what corruption does (how it structure relationships, both affectively and practically). Corruption accusations surface in many parts of the humanitarian system. I focus on rations: the policing of eligibility for such aid, the procedures for registration on the rolls, and the management of delivery and use of such goods.

The conceptual universe of corruption includes many actions, behaviors, and attitudes. In the case of the humanitarian system, what links the diverse ways of talking about corruption is a claim that certain policies and practices are subverting the "proper" working of the humanitarian apparatus. The language of corruption ties together a diverse array of "bad" practices—including fraud, nepotism, misuse of resources, and duplicity—and identifies them as similar sorts of failings. I have elsewhere described humanitarianism as "a tradition of compromised action," in which humanitarian organizations can be distinguished not by whether they make such compromises but, instead, by which ones they make (Feldman 2007b:701). Here I suggest that efforts to name and combat corruption are a means through which determinations are made about which compromises would be too much and would threaten the fundamental humanitarian character of the enterprise. Like everything else about humanitarian practice, these claims are contested and unsettled.

I advance several related arguments about how corruption operates in humanitarianism. Most broadly, as above, suspicions and accusations of corruption play an important role in the on-the-ground work of defining corruption for providers and recipients of humanitarian aid. Some might think that such definitional work is the concern of policy makers and scholars alone, with people in the field only concerned with the technicalities of aid management. My research with Palestinian refugees and humanitarian aid providers confirms that questions of definition are regularly debated on the ground. Suspicions and accusations of corruption play a role in these debates in part through (1) establishing and elaborating the refugee as a category of humanitarian governance (and of personhood) and (2) articulating and consolidating an array of obligations and responsibilities across the humanitarian field. The longevity of Palestinian displacement and the concomitant longevity of the assistance apparatus make it possible to trace these processes over time.

Palestinian Refugees and Extended Displacement

The more than five million Palestinian refugees (counting only those who are registered with the United Nations [UN] Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees; UNRWA) constitute one of the world’s largest and longest-lasting refugee populations. Approximately 750,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes and dispossessed of their property in the nakba (catastrophe) of 1948. Displacement extended over many years, beginning as fighting broke out in Palestine ahead of the British departure, intensifying after the May 1948 declaration of the state of Israel and the entrance of surrounding Arab countries into the failed fight to defend Palestine, and continuing for several years as Israel carried out a process of expelling Palestinians from parts of the country. Later conflicts have produced additional displacement. Never having been permitted to return to their homes, the Palestinian refugee population has persisted through generations and increased significantly in size.

Both longevity and size create resource challenges for UNRWA, the UN agency that was established in 1950 to provide aid to refugees across five “fields” of displacement: Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. But there were significant resource constraints even in the first years after displacement, which made management of the relief rolls a central part of UNRWA practice from the beginning and also key to the work of the volunteer agencies that delivered UN-provided aid before the agency was created. As Palestinian displacement has continued over nearly 70 years, the humanitarian apparatus has changed significantly. The expansive aid basket that marked the first years of displacement (and which is brought back for particular crises) has been replaced with a system that is less comprehensive and more focused on chronic and structural needs (education and health care are at the center). The political import of humanitarian aid has always been a subject of debate among Palestinians and outside observers. These debates have continued and even intensified over time.

As the humanitarian assistance regime was codified, a formal division of jurisdiction was established. UNRWA (with assistance from other agencies at times) was responsible for the provision of aid. Host countries were responsible for administration and security in the camps. Humanitarian governance has always been a shared endeavor, and refugees have never been simply passive recipients of commands from either humanitarians or governments. They have made demands, refused policies and procedures that they deemed to be deleterious to their community, and sometimes simply ignored or evaded rules and regulations. Furthermore, the three broad cat-

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2. The causes of Palestinian departure have been much explored in the historiography on Israel-Palestine, most famously by Benny Morris (1987).
4. Until 1967, the West Bank was part of Jordan, and until 1952, UNRWA also operated in Israel.
egories of actors in the humanitarian dynamic—humanitarian agencies and personnel, host governments, and refugees—frequently overlap in practice. Notably, the vast majority of humanitarian workers who provide aid to Palestinian refugees are themselves Palestinian refugees.

Corruption Makes Refugees

The anthropological literature on humanitarianism has highlighted how these systems of aid and protection impose significant limits on recipients (Fassin 2005; Malkki 1996). To gain recognition as a “victim,” as an object worthy of humanitarian concern, refugees (and other persons in need) are often required to appear as apolitical suffering subjects (Fassin and D’Halluin 2005; Feldman 2009). The humanitarian search for vulnerability can, in fact, make certain categories of persons—especially adult males—more vulnerable to exclusion from humanitarian recognition (Kotef 2010; Mokdadi 2014; Ticktin 2011). They may also be more likely to be accused of fraud as they make their way through gatekeeping mechanisms. Accusations of corruption contribute to what many people identify as humanitarianism’s “dehumanizing” effects, but this is not their only effect vis-à-vis the refugee category. Suspicions of corruption also have the perhaps ironic effect of ascribing to refugees a more complex personhood than that with which the humanitarian system can generally engage. Instead of viewing refugees as passive sufferers and recipients, concerns about corruption develop and deploy a sense of refugees as also conniving and duplicitious. Although these may not be positive attributes, they are undeniable human ones.

The archival and ethnographic record is replete with expressions of concern that refugees will lie and cheat.7 They are seen as likely to do these things not because they are bad people but because their circumstances are both precarious and boring (there is a humanitarian consensus that idleness leads to no good). If ascriptions of humanitarian need are predicated on the perceived incapacity of refugees to care for themselves, refugee corruption highlights another perceived incapacity: the incapacity to be wholly moral agents.8 Indeed, to become a refugee is to lose, by dint of circumstance, some of the capacity for moral action that people had before displacement. In addition to providing basic means of survival, humanitarian governance must also manage the moral existence of the recipient population.9 Some of this management entails reeducating refugees in morality, but a good portion of it involves the humanitarian taking-up of moral decision making on behalf of refugees. This latter process requires disciplinary actions, undertaken not as punishment but as a means of compelling ethical action.

The management of fraud on the ration rolls brings these concerns to the fore. Such fraud was of great concern to the agencies that first supplied UN-provided aid to refugees—the International Committee of the Red Cross, the League of Red Cross Societies (LRCS), and the American Friends Service Committee—and it has been one of the central concerns of UNRWA from its establishment. Limited resources meant that there were strict ceilings on the number of ration recipients in each area of operation. Once that ceiling was reached, additional eligible persons could not be added to the lists. UNRWA viewed it as a humanitarian imperative to purge the rolls. Refugees, however, viewed maintaining a presence on the rolls, even in contradiction to the official rules, as a vital humanitarian matter. Their primary concern was meeting their own needs, not satisfying the regulations of humanitarian aid groups. The mechanisms necessary to clean up the rolls were viewed as ethically problematic by humanitarian actors themselves (Feldman 2007a, 2007b). But getting the rolls right was deemed to be the more fundamental imperative. Given the stakes, it is not surprising that managing the rolls brought humanitarian workers, refugees, and host governments into regular conflict.

Direct appeals to refugees to aid in these efforts illuminate how humanitarian agencies approached these people not just as private recipients of aid but as, at least partly, public participants in the humanitarian system. In a biweekly newsletter that the LRCS produced for its aid recipients, the associate director of operations in Syria penned a letter to refugees. He urged them to appreciate the efforts of the LRCS and underscored the importance of their cooperation in making the relief operation a success. He acknowledged that, even as the Red Cross tried to “exercise its activity with the maximum efficiency possible,” it could never be perfect. And, he said, refugees had a role to play in improving the work: “The refugees can help the Red Cross to achieve perfection by making helpful comments and suggestions provided they are well-considered and constructive. Systematic criticism and permanent discontentment are in general destructive and cannot contribute, either morally or materially, to ameliorate a situation.” The associate director also chastised refugees for subterfuge: “True declarations will also greatly help our organisation. We have lost considerable time, encountered many difficulties simply because some refugees were not honest and did not give the right number of the members of their family and failed to notify us of deaths and births occurring, to the

5. There is a perhaps ironic similarity to the suspicious state that David Nugent describes, in which Peruvian state authorities viewed themselves as “surrounded by a veritable sea of subversives” (Nugent 2018).

6. This attribution of amorality, if not immorality, to impoverished people is not limited to Palestinians or to refugees. See Ansell (2018), in this volume of Current Anthropology.

7. This process is part of a broader terrain of hierarchies, inequities, and paternalism that is part of humanitarian practice (Fassin 2010; Feldman 2016; Redfield 2012).

8. International Federation of Red Cross Societies archives, A0403-2
19740, publications, “A word from Dr. Depage,” Al Aghathat, July 15, 1949:2.
detriment of their interests and our efforts.” This insistence that refugee interests and humanitarian efforts are identical, that refugees share a public responsibility, even if they do not realize it, is a thread that runs through much humanitarian communication with Palestinians. A central object of humanitarian governance has been to convince refugees of this alignment and to have them act accordingly.

The many, and frequently unsuccessful, efforts by UNRWA to make sure that only those whom it deemed bona fide refugees appeared on the rolls indicate how challenging this aim was and underscore the related necessity for humanitarian actors to take charge of ethical decision making among refugees. Because UNRWA was unable to rely solely on persuasion, investigation was a key mechanism for ethical enactment. In 1954, the chief district officer of the Gaza field reported to UNRWA headquarters on the state of investigations of the ration rolls. The investigation system in Gaza was multipronged, responding to false registration, receipt of rations under a false name, and maintenance on the rolls of properly registered persons who were no longer eligible (due to death, movement, or income). It involved both investigations that began with “reports gathered from the camp residents, who, because of family troubles and feuds volunteer information” and periodic identity checks during ration distribution. Just as ration fraud involved multiple actors, so too did efforts to combat it.

Central to this policing were efforts to enlist mukhtars, who were themselves corrupt when they vouched for noneligible persons, to instead act against ration fraud.10 The chief district officer reported that agreement had been reached with the Egyptian administrators of Gaza to have them “exert considerable pressure on Mukhtars and Sheikhs [village and tribal leaders] to submit lists of false registrations from their particular villages.” This process had already begun with one village and had yielded 75 names. He also reported on a plan for cooperation in policing deaths. Egyptian authorities agreed to supply seven guards if UNRWA would supply eight to cover the operation in policing deaths. Egyptian authorities agreed to supply seven guards if UNRWA would supply eight to cover the operation in policing deaths. Egyptian administrators of Gaza to have them “submit lists of false registrations from their particular villages.” This process had already begun with one village and had yielded 75 names. He also reported on a plan for cooperation in policing deaths. Egyptian authorities agreed to supply seven guards if UNRWA would supply eight to cover the 15 cemeteries in the Gaza Strip. These guards would “prevent secret burials and check the death certificates issued by the Public Health Dept.” Because UNRWA believed that approximately 50% of deaths were being registered under false names, this procedure could make a considerable difference. Informing, coercion, and surveillance were at the center of what the chief district officer viewed as the most effective system for managing fraud, and they were therefore also at the center of the relationship between humanitarian actors and refugees.

Egyptian officials supported this practice, but the Syrian government expressed concern about using informing in ration rolls management.11 In a 1962 letter to UNRWA, the director of the Syrian government’s refugee agency (PARI) commented that some refugees “have lately resorted to the habit of intriguing against other fellow refugees by sending information to UNRWA about the income of such refugees, with the bad intention of persuading the Agency to stop the issue of their rations. They resort to such means to avenge themselves or because of personal and family disputes and dissensions.”12 This practice was disturbing to PARI, and the letter went on to assert the conviction that UNRWA officials would agree that it was contrary to the common good, contrary to the rules, and “might lead to the spread of corruptness among the refugee circles.” The potential corruption to which the PARI official referred was both the subversion of the proper workings of the humanitarian system and the degradation of moral character among those who could be encouraged to act in this way.

The PARI official expressed concern that a mechanism intended to fight one form of corruption could lead to another. Here he seemed to reference the idea of mutual care and compassion as a good to be nurtured by humanitarian practice. He also worried about the consequences from either “the social or the security aspects,” referencing the common host government worry about disrupting stability. He further argued that the agency should actively discourage the practice and should disregard any information obtained this way. “By merely admitting to consider and investigate such pieces of information, we might encourage others to follow that way.”13 No response from UNRWA is included in the file, but if the Gaza director’s attitude was indicative of an agency position, UNRWA may not have shared this Syrian concern. Matters of care and security were not irrelevant to UNRWA, but controlling the rolls was seen as more fundamental and was also believed to contribute to these other goals.

Managing the rolls was a challenge in every field, but Jordan was viewed by UNRWA as the most difficult one. The large number of Palestinians in the country, most of whom were granted Jordanian citizenship in 1954, also meant that the government paid particular attention to security problems arising from their presence. Attempts by UNRWA to cleanse the rolls through investigations were inevitably met with resistance by refugees, and the Jordanian government, seeking to stave off unrest, regularly insisted that the process be halted.

9. UNRWA archives [UA], inactive files, box 1 E 6B, from chief district officer, Gaza, to acting director, UNRWA HQ, June 24, 1954.
10. American Friends Service Committee workers in Gaza reported that mukhtars “will sell their signatures on virtually every occasion, shaking the refugees down if a complaint is to be submitted with their confirmation, if the mukhtar is to confirm the membership of a certain family in his village, confirming a certain number of children, etc, etc. What is sold for truth can equally be sold for falsehood, and that is frequently the practice it appears” (American Friends Service Committee archives, #41 FS sect Palestine, letter from Howard Wriggins to Colin Bell, February 18, 1949).

11. On Egyptian reliance on informing in its own governing work, see Feldman 2015.
12. UA, RE 7 RE 210 (S) part 1, from director of PARI, to director of UNRWA affairs, Damascus, November 19, 1962.
13. He also noted the case of a particular family that had lost rations as a result of such informing and suggested that this measure be reversed (it is possible that the letter was prompted by this case).
In one such instance, in September 1953, UNRWA officials restarted investigations in the Bethlehem area after a 10-month suspension. UNRWA’s Jordan representative reported that, despite “considerable opposition” (presumably from refugees) in this area as well as in Hebron and Jericho, the agency had been able to carry out investigations—until the Jordanian government intervened and requested a halt.14 He described a conversation with the minister of foreign affairs that spelled out the reasons for the halt:

His Government was faced with a public security problem of grave proportions and it was almost miraculous that no serious trouble from the refugees had occurred up to now. He felt that to continue to conduct our investigations on the present lines might precipitate an explosion which must be dealt with by the Jordan government at which UNRWA would be a mere spectator! He contented [sic] that even if there were a number ofineligibles on the rations lists, that number was not large, and that any “witchhunt” to eliminate them would precipitate a crisis out of all proportion to the benefits accruing.15

The Jordanian government did not view corruption of the rolls as the most important problem for humanitarian governance. Investigations were suspended at this time, and an effort by UNRWA the following year to restart a process of ration rolls rectification produced a strong negative reaction from the government, which again cited public security concerns and challenged the agency’s right to move ahead without government agreement. After considerable back and forth and a lot of mutual recrimination, agreement was reached on the need to create an “effective system to establish the bona fides of ration recipients.”16

That things were not in fact settled is made clear in the ongoing correspondence on this problem over the years. In its efforts to solicit greater government assistance, UNRWA linked cleansing the rolls to refugee concerns for aid expansion. In 1964, UNRWA’s Jordan director commented in a letter to the Jordanian minister of development and reconstruction that “it should be possible to issue rations to the children in question within the existing ration ceiling if the Jordan Government will extend to the Agency its full and effective cooperation in eliminating unreported deaths and absences, false and duplicate registrations, and families (including employees of the Jordan Government) who are in receipt of sufficient income to support themselves.”17 Insisting on the “hardship and suffering which the continuing existence of these inaccuracies must cause to many eligible refugees who are genuinely in need of assistance,” UNRWA officials asserted that they were “unable to accept the suggestion that the Agency’s investigations should be restricted.” The letter went on to say that the agency hoped to “count on the cooperation of the Government in explaining the true situation to the refugees and in convincing them that these investigations, far from causing harm and injury, are in fact of positive benefit to the genuinely deserving members of the refugee community in Jordan.” The effort to maintain positive relations kept the agency’s language diplomatic, but underlying this and many other such communications was a concern that the Jordanian government was at least complicit in corruption by interfering with its management.

The refusal of refugees to report deaths and the failure of the Jordanian government to capture these occurrences were sources of ongoing frustration. In 1973, UNRWA lamented the number of aid-eligible children who could not be added to the rolls and reproached the Jordanian government for contributing to its “inability to obtain information which would make possible the redistribution of rations from absent and non-needy refugees.”18 The letter went on to detail the problem with the dead: “The number of deaths reported in Jordan to the Agency during the past six years has averaged less than 2.0 per thousand. This figure is absurd in the light of normal vital statistics, and the number of unreported dead alone which have accumulated on the Agency’s records over the longer period before 1967 must amount to tens of thousands.” If the problem was not addressed, the missive indicated, it would become increasingly difficult to get enough donations to provide rations at all.19 Furthermore, “the Agency has a responsibility to the international community to ensure that the rations provided for needy refugees are distributed to those for whom they are intended.” In referencing the international community, the agency underscored the potentially punitive capacity of donors to influence the system.

That the problem continued and was not limited to Jordan is made clear in correspondence in 1987. By this point, the basic ration system had been discontinued. Only those refugees who qualified as “special hardship cases” received rations. But resource limits remained. Writing to the directors of each of UNRWA’s fields in 1987 about the number of registered refugees 80 years of age or older, the chief of the relief division remarked: “Once more these lists are appalling and I cannot believe that we have so many refugees alive of such great ages. The record holder lives in Syria and was born in 1819!”20 In a follow-up letter, he described how “a total of 4,887 refugees are aged 100 years and above. The four oldest refugees are 187 years old.”21


15. UA, inactive files, box 11, file J.16, investigations–1954, letter from W. T. Clark (acting UNRWA representative, Jordan) to acting director, UNRWA HQ, Beirut, October 14, 1953.


19. Except for the salaries of senior personnel, UNRWA is funded entirely on a voluntary basis by UN member nations.

old. This is of course ridiculous and we must rectify our rolls.”
As such expressions of frustration confirm, the nexus of fraud and response had the effect of also shaping the views that the various actors in the humanitarian system had of each other.

**Ration Sales as a Site of Humanitarian Governance**

Concern about fraud on the ration rolls was about who was getting access to rations—whether they were needy and whether they were eligible (not identical categories). Humanitarian actors were also concerned about whether people were putting their rations to proper use. UNRWA officials acknowledged that the rations provided by the agency were never enough. The 1959 annual report stated that "the basic ration provided by the Agency has been virtually unchanged since 1951. It is generally agreed to be inadequate as a diet.”

The agency noted that, even in the very early years of expansive provisions, refugees were rarely able to live on aid alone. As the LRCS turned over its operations to UNRWA in 1950, an LRCS employee reflected: “They [refugees] know that they need salt to prepare bread from flour and wood to bake it, they also need onions to cook the beans... They have either to sell part of their rations in order to buy salt and onions and run the risk of starvation before they receive their next allocation, or endeavor to get more rations. The refugees are the same everywhere—they are not to blame.”

But even as humanitarian actors recognized that a certain amount of fraud was necessary for survival, they continued to view a full-fledged market in rations as unacceptable.

The Israeli occupation of the West Bank in June 1967 led to a second wave of Palestinian displacement, as refugees and newly displaced persons crossed the Jordan River to the East Bank. This displacement returned many people to a state of acute need for rations, and it disrupted and then reorganized networks that had built up over the years to move rations into the marketplace. As early as July 1967, a UNRWA official reported that a larger number of the refugees to Jericho had been residing in Amman than UNRWA had been aware of and that Jericho merchants had been collecting their rations. With a system in place in the Wihdat camp in Amman that required each West Bank family receiving rations to present what actions lie at the heart of humanitarian intervention. In this month’s issue,” with the plan to turn them over for sale afterward. To put a stop to this commercial activity, he proposed expanding the identification system to all ration distribution—including distribution to East Bank refugees—nothing that government cooperation, especially in the form of policing, would be needed.

This proposal was accepted by UNRWA headquarters, and at the end of August the agency notified the Jordanian government of the decision. The policy was implemented throughout the country, and there were initially few problems. But in February 1968, refugees in the Karameh refugee camp in the Jordan Valley refused to collect their rations, leading to a “tense situation and mass meeting” according to the Jordanian government. The identification requirement was the cause of the strike. This circumstance alarmed the Jordanian government (and it did not please UNRWA), which requested that the agency respond to this “ominous situation” by continuing rations distribution “in the manner hitherto adopted.”

The initial reaction of UNRWA officials on the ground was to “let matters ride in the hope that the opposition would peter out (as had happened on previous occasions when the refugees have gone on strike against receiving rations).”

As UNRWA and the government squared off over how to proceed (and the correspondence indicates that a fair degree of offense was taken, especially on the part of government ministers), both spoke in the name of the refugees. The government referred to “the hardships and miseries that were brought about as a result of the recent Israeli armed invasion against Jordan” and argued that it was “inadvisable to carry out such an operation among the masses of desperate refugees, many of whom have been evicted twice within less than two decades, a time when the only international help left to them amounted a little more than a loaf of bread.” UNRWA, for its part, indicated that the system put “the distribution of rations on a much more equitable and defensible basis than before and this is undoubtedly in the interest of the refugees themselves.” Embedded in these competing claims to speak (and act) on behalf of refugees are competing arguments about what actions lie at the heart of humanitarian intervention. In the end, UNRWA agreed to a temporary halt to the identification requirement in Karameh, with assurances (that it did

22. UNRWA, Annual report 1959. Aid given to destitute nonrefugees in Gaza was even less adequate: “the regular monthly issues of flour, butter, cheese and milk given by the Egyptian and United States (through CARE) Governments provide only a basic 1,050 calories per person per day (compared to the Agency’s basic provision of 1,500 to refugees in summer)” (UNRWA, Special report of the director concerning other claimants for relief: A/2978/Add.1, 1955).
24. UA RE 8 RE 210/5, part 1, from field operations officer, Jordan, to director of UNRWA affairs, Jordan, July 28, 1967.
25. UA RE 8 RE 210/5, part 1, text of memo from Jordanian minister of foreign affairs in memo from UNRWA commissioner general to UN under-secretary general for special political affairs (Bunche) to UNRWA commissioner general (Michelmore) l, February 6, 1968.
26. UA RE 8 RE 210/5, part 1, from commissioner general (Michelmore) to UN under-secretary for special political affairs (Bunche), February 8, 1968.
27. UA RE 8 RE 210/5, part 1, from UNRWA commissioner general to UN under-secretary general for special political affairs (Bunche) to UNRWA commissioner general (Michelmore) l, February 6, 1968.
28. UA RE 8 RE 210/5, part 1, suggested draft reply to Jordan government memo, nd.
accusation of rations (which certainly contributed to refugee livelihoods) was viewed as fundamentally corrupt, as a failure of morals. From the humanitarian perspective, it underscored the incapacity of refugees to act as independent ethical agents. The archival record does not include refugee statements on the meaning they attributed to rations selling, but the practice seems to constitute an unsanctioned project for improving their lives—perhaps not an absence of ethical capacity, but a practical response to complex needs.

Accusation Names Obligations

Aid providers are not the only ones who make corruption accusations in humanitarian settings. Certainly in the Palestinian instance, and by no means only in this case, refugees also make judgments about the actions and behaviors of others and identify their critique as being about corruption. Defending humanitarian personnel against such charges, Anis Nasr, a Palestinian refugee employee of the LRCS, acknowledged that many of the things that refugees demanded were reasonable, even the “minimum of their normal requirements,” but also stressed that employees could only perform the mission that they were given. Refugee-humanitarian workers thus found themselves criticized “through no fault of their own.” Nasr attributed the refugee tendency to accusation partly to the same idleness and frustration that sometimes led them to corruption. As displacement stretched on with no return in sight, his morale dropped, and sitting idle all day he had to think. Thoughts of idle people are directed more towards evil than good. He must do something about it, and he did, by resuming his attacks on the local staff with changed tactics. The new method was in the form of an anonymous letter addressed to the administration, accusing his fellow refugee of mal-administration, irregularities and misconduct.

Given the confidence of higher personnel in the local staff, these accusations were largely disregarded, and even the accused staff were understanding: “This action did not create any ill-feeling amongst the local staff, for those who did it were not in a normal state of mind.”

In this case, the accusations of corruption may have been easily dismissed, but such charges—especially of favoritism and misdirection of resources—have been a persistent part of the humanitarian dynamic, and they are not always (deemed) false. Corruption accusations are a site of humanitarian governance and refugee regulation. But they are not only that. Corruption accusations are also a crucial mechanism through which the terms of humanitarian obligations get worked out. In naming certain actions, policies, and procedures as unacceptable, these accusations are a form of definition in the negative. Humanitarianism is not and must not be fraudulent, duplicitous, or unfair. Accusations also convey an argument about what humanitarianism is and must be: adequate and responsive to people’s needs and not deleterious to their rights. Although few humanitarian actors would disagree with the attributes called nonhumanitarian, the boundaries of positive obligations are highly contested.

When they talk about humanitarian obligations, Palestinian refugees address not only failings in humanitarian implementation but a larger question about whether humanitarian assistance is itself in fundamental conflict with their aspirations. Collected in UNRWA’s archive are numerous petitions and complaints from individuals and groups of refugees, press accounts of protests in the camps, and pamphlets by Palestinian political organizations exhorting camp residents to action. These exhortations frequently identify the agency as part of a plot to

29. The particular question of Karamé shortly become moot. After the battle of Karamé in March 1968, when Israeli forces targeted PLO fighters in the town and camp, the refugee camps in the Jordan valley were closed, and refugees moved elsewhere. UNRWA reports on identification checks of people from the camp now living elsewhere indicated no problems in the following months, suggesting to officials that “the difficulties we encountered at Karamé did not come from the rank and file of the refugee community” (UA RE 8 RE 210/5, part 2, from commissioner general [Michelmore] to UN under-secretary for special political affairs [Bunche], April 24, 1968).


31. UA RE 8 RE 210/5, part 2, from director of UNRWA affairs to deputy commissioner general, May 18, 1968.

32. IFRC, A0403-2 19740, personal experiences, Anis Nasr, assistant field director, Lebanon, March 29, 1950.
“liquidate” Palestinian claims. Responding to the firing of some UNRWA teachers for engaging in political activity, “The Committee for Defending the Returnees” issued a declaration that identified services as a means through which the agency threatened refugees. It threatened them “in their salaries, in their clothes and shelter to deprive them from the simplest human right,” freedom of thought, opinion, and action. Addressing camp residents, the declaration asked: “Has the Agency supplied the needs of the returnees, from food, education and medical care? Has she allowed them at least to live cooperating and helping each other or has she intrigued against them to disunite them and to weaken them?” The declaration raised the possibility that the humanitarian enterprise itself might be duplicitous, a corruption of the international obligation to support Palestinian rights.

Even as these pamphlets name UNRWA as a political enemy of the Palestinians, the demands in these pamphlets almost always also include specific requests for improvements in humanitarian services. A group called “Arab Palestinian Youth in Lebanon” declared that “the U.N. who origin cause in the disaster cannot be considered the suitable organization to solve the Palestine problem” and that “the Relief Agency is a danger threatening their case.” It then went on to list more than 50 specific demands for improvements in humanitarian services, including increasing access to health care, limiting class sizes, increasing the calories in ration allotments, replacing international staff with Palestinians, and abolishing the income scale that governed ration provision. Whatever judgment refugees might make about humanitarianism, it could not be wholly rejected. This fact underscores that, to the extent that humanitarianism is compromised action, these compromises are required not only of humanitarian workers but of refugees themselves.

Evaluating UNRWA, people express a range of opinions that reflect the contention around this institution. Some people say that the very existence of UNRWA is part of an effort to undermine a political solution to the Palestinian problem. As one person told me, “UNRWA has a strategy that it follows. In the beginning—this is my opinion—UNRWA . . . used to give to the people too generously . . . to encourage people to leave their homeland. And unfortunately people ran after these things—some of them.” Other people insist that UNRWA’s existence is an acknowledgment of Palestinian political claims and of the responsibility of the international community to address them. As an ex-Gazan who is also a UNRWA employee put it, “UNRWA does not represent a humanitarian service given to refugees. The services given to us are our right. Our problem is created by the international community and they are responsible for solving it. UNRWA has a political dimension, rather than a humanitarian one.” A resident of Dheisheh camp in the West Bank echoed these sentiments: “The sack of flour which we take from UNRWA—or we used to take from UNRWA—was something political to me. It was not humanitarian.” These debates about UNRWA and humanitarianism have been ongoing since the first years after 1948. Putting humanitarianism in question (Barnett and Weiss 2008) is a key part of Palestinian politics through which Palestinians have addressed the international community, host countries, and each other.

### A Changing Rations System and the Question of Humanitarian Responsibility

Just as rations eligibility and provision were sites for evaluations of refugee character and potential corruption, so too have they been venues for arguments about humanitarian obligations. Reductions in ration allotments were especially charged in this regard. For the first decades after displacement, both in 1948 and after the second displacement of 1967, rations were vital to refugee survival, even if they were never sufficient for that survival. Over time, as more people found employment (in UNRWA, in host countries, and abroad), their material significance receded, even as their symbolic and political importance remained. Income scales were one response to this change. These provided for a stepped reduction in rations allotment, with rations eventually withdrawn when family income crossed the determined threshold. Eventually, UNRWA began to consider ending the basic rations program altogether. When, in the late 1970s, financial exigencies led to a reduction in goods provided to rations recipients, UNRWA officials determined that this reduction “neither affects adversely the nutritional state of most ration recipients nor strikes alarm in the refugee community, despite occasional outcries by mukhtars.”

Noting that the ration allotment was, at that point, 836 calories per person per day and that an average family of six was likely getting only two or three portions (due to income phase out), it seemed that rations were making little contribution to the family diet. Recognizing the fact that some people did have extraordinary need, UNRWA introduced a new category of special hardship cases who were targeted for additional rations: 1,600 calories per day, with a goal to increase that to 1,879 calories per day. When the program began in January 1980, it was successfully implemented in Jordan, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. The Syrian government refused the program, and the Lebanon field office recommended against implementation.

34. UA box RE 3 RE 150 part 1, “The expellees in Lebanon: their resolution and demands,” Badge of the Palestine Arab Youth in Lebanon, January 1, 1960. The pamphlet also complained that UNRWA was acting like a government: “It is regrettable that the emigrants see the Relief Agency behave as if it was a Government having a fixed aspect, enacting rules and regulations to apply to the emigrants (as if they were its subjects) [whether] they wanted it or not.”
there because of anticipated opposition from the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO).

And refugees, often through the mukhtars who were local leaders, complained about rations reductions. These complaints linked need and right, a persistent feature of refugee discourse and action vis-à-vis UNRWA. In a 1981 petition objecting to the significant curtailment in rations provision, a mukhtar from the Balata refugee camp near Nablus identified this service change as a violation of rights: “Where is humanity and what they call Human Rights? The rights that were granted to them by the United Nations in-lieu-of their usurped lands? Where is justice? Where is democracy? Where is the Human Rights that were recognized unanimously by the United Nations.” In charging UNRWA with failing in its obligations, refugees clearly name a humanitarian obligation to protect their rights and not just their needs. The extent to which such responsibility should be acknowledged by humanitarian actors is a subject of ongoing contention both within the agency and in relations between the agency and refugees, host countries, and the wider international community. But the claim has not been simply dismissed.

At the same time, humanitarians insist on a primary obligation to identify and respond to the greatest needs. Ration reductions continued, and officials began to advocate more forcefully for ending the basic rations program. The chief of the relief division argued that it “must be eliminated” in order to enable relief to go “to the really needy sectors of the population.” He identified two groups “which are particularly disadvantaged, the disabled and the special hardship cases, and for whom the Agency does very little.” Recognizing both the financial savings that such a change would produce and the lack of real need for the program, the deputy commissioner-general noted a number of obstacles. Many donors to UNRWA made in-kind food contributions, using the rations program as a means to deal with their own surplus food, and had been resistant to changing to cash donations. There would be opposition from Jordan, Syria, and the PLO, “not on grounds of humanitarian sympathy for suffering refugees, but on political grounds and the desire to maintain the image of UNRWA much as it was in the ’50s.” As the UNRWA cabinet prepared to deliberate on the matter, a memo from the relief services department underscored that “the sole justification for continuing to subsidize a majority of refugee families by means of the basic ration programme is political: the programme makes no economic sense for people whose most urgent unsatisfied need is communal.” Palestinians may have agreed that their most urgent need was for national restoration, but they disagreed with the argument that maintaining the rations program was irrelevant to that demand.

In the end, the change was enabled by exigencies on the ground. The program was suspended in September 1982 to devote resources to refugee victims of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and it was never restarted, despite UN General Assembly requests, “because sufficient contributions have not been forthcoming.” This change was met with objection: “complaints and protests continually being made by individual refugees, their representatives and the host Governments regarding the non-resumption of the basic ration.” But it was never resumed. The introduction of the special hardship case category—which is now being replaced by a social safety net program that uses the categories of absolute and abject poverty—required the development of new criteria for eligibility and new mechanisms for determining whether people met those criteria. There was a limit to the number of persons or families allowed to be recognized as special hardship cases, which means that eligibility for this status was based on not just people’s absolute condition but their condition relative to other refugees.

The mechanisms for determining people’s conditions have been contentious and highlight another venue in which the variety of actors within the humanitarian world view each other with suspicion and charge each other with different sorts of corruption. In this case, humanitarian workers sometimes view refugees as (at best) failing to appreciate the principles of humanitarian action or (at worst) being selfish and even duplicitous in their efforts to secure access to resources at the expense of their more needy neighbors. Also, refugees sometimes view humanitarian workers and policy makers as either personally corrupt (allowing waste [connections] to play a central role in decisions) or as systemically demeaning (using investigation procedures that require people to trade their dignity for assis-

36. UA box RE 67, RE 500, petition from mukhtar of Balata camp to UNRWA commissioner general, August 6, 1981. In UNRWA’s response to the petition, budget constraints were referenced as the reason no restoration was possible.
37. UA box 4 RE 200 part 2, from chief, Relief Services Division, to director of Relief Service, January 28, 1982. He noted that UNRWA expenditure for the disabled amounted to 0.00072% of the annual budget, a number that was, he said, “nothing to be proud of.”
38. UA box 4 RE 200 part 2, from deputy commissioner-general to director of Relief Services, January 29, 1982.
40. UA box 4 RE 200 part 2, annex A to letter from director, Relief Services Division, to acting commissioner-general, November 20, 1985.
41. UA box 4 RE 200 part 2, annex A to letter from director, Relief Services Division, to acting commissioner-general, November 20, 1985.
42. A UNRWA report on the program in 2006 described the criteria: “They must be in economic distress with no healthy male adult between the ages of nineteen and sixty, and the total family income can not exceed two-thirds of a grade one step one of local UNRWA salary, i.e., lowest paid UNRWA area staff member with the same number of dependents, they also need to fit within one of the eight categories of eligibility criteria. The majority of special hardship case families assisted fall within three categories: the elderly (A category), female-headed households (W category) and those unable to work due to chronic illness or disability (M category)” (Hejoj and Badran 2006:22).
tance). The comment made to me by a resident of the Burj al Barajneh refugee camp reflects widespread views among refugees: “We, all the Palestinians, as soon as you hear the word UNRWA it means facad [corruption]. . . . It means a corrupt employee, a more corrupt supervisor and higher supervisor is even more and more corrupt. . . . That is its definition and meaning for us.” The charge that wasta governs aid distribution is classically recognizable as a charge of corruption, and it is part of a broad corruption lexicon that structures people’s judgments of each other and of humanitarian practice.

UNRWA officials and beneficiaries evaluate the procedures for special hardship case determination quite differently. When I interviewed a chief area officer in Lebanon (a refugee himself), he expressed considerable frustration about how the refugee population dealt with the agency and its procedures. He explained that the community feels that the agency is obligated to cover all of its needs but that the agency’s budget is highly restricted. One of the challenges that UNRWA faces, he told me, was how to convince people of these limited resources and that they therefore might not be eligible for special hardship status, because someone else in the community might be in more need. From his perspective, the priority was to help the most vulnerable, and others—even those with legitimate needs—should recognize the validity of these distinctions.

Refugees certainly recognize that there are different needs in the community, although what I heard from many people in the course of my research is that resources do not necessarily go to those most in need but rather to those who are most connected (whether those connections are to UNRWA personnel or to political factions). So refugees often reject UNRWA’s assertion that they are simply determining who is most in need. Apart from questions of personal corruption, many refugees also question the grounds on which determinations of need occur only among policy makers and central offices. They are also articulated in the field—a space where recipient voices and experiences have greater weight.

I have focused on how suspicions about motives and probity, often articulated through the language of corruption, are deployed in these contests over definition. Suspicion is not the only ground for debates about definition, but it has been a consistent one. It has also structured the ways refugees become objects of humanitarian governance. As private persons endowed with a kind of public responsibility—often against their will and certainly without their choice—refugee behavior must be monitored for fraud, duplicity, and misuse. Humanitarians must take on responsibility not only for refugees’ physical survival and basic needs but also for their morality, and refugees are not passive recipients of such charges but make plenty of charges of their own. Circulating accusations of corruption are a fertile ground for making claims about obligations. The charges that Palestinian refugees sometimes make about the true purpose of humanitarian aid take the question of definition to a more fundamental level. Is humanitarianism, in fact, a force for good in the world?

Corruption accusations are a means through which different actors define what humanitarianism should be. Such accusations highlight certain actions, policies, and procedures as not properly humanitarian, as an abuse of one’s position as either aid provider or recipient, and in so doing, accusation names humanitarian obligations. These obligations are not defined in only negative terms; frequently, an alternative vision is offered. Humanitarians are called upon to support refugees’ rights and not just their needs. Refugees, for their part, are asked to recognize systematic criteria and not just personal exigency. Both

Suspicions Humanitarianism

Despite the ubiquity of humanitarian language, action, and sentiment in our current world, there has been no consensus on the precise definition of humanitarianism. Many definitions have been offered by scholars, practitioners, and recipients, and they often clash. Humanitarian obligations, jurisdiction, limits, and even actors remain unsettled and often hotly contested. Not only does humanitarianism reach across multiple domains—framing discourse and sentiment, a component of international law and convention—its practitioners and recipients have long been engaged in active debate about which forms of action are truly humanitarian and which binding principles are necessary to qualify one’s practice and motives as genuinely humanitarian. Some humanitarian organizations reject the idea that human rights or development should be incorporated into the field. Others see the provision of relief without rights or attention to structural issues as so minimal as to fall below the threshold requirements of real care for others. As Western humanitarian organizations view the expanding humanitarian universe with concern, they worry that those whom they identify as “new” actors (mainly from the Global South) will not abide by the principles of neutrality and impartiality accepted by the “humanitarian club” (Barnett and Walker 2015), and some of these other actors point out the paternalist, even imperialist, attitudes of Western agencies. These sorts of discussions do not occur only among policy makers and central offices. They are also articulated in the field—a space where recipient voices and experiences have greater weight.

Humanitarians are called upon to support refugees’ rights and not just their needs. Refugees, for their part, are asked to recognize systematic criteria and not just personal exigency. Both
parties demand an evaluation of people and personnel within the limits of their missions and their capacities. Because these arguments are embedded in immediate action, they have immediate consequences of various kinds. Even when these charges do not succeed in changing the shape of “proper” humanitarian action, they directly impact the interactions and relations among its participants. Circulating concerns about corruption are part of why humanitarian relations of care are also always relations of suspicion.

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Peasants, Experts, Clients, and Soybeans
The Fixing of Paraguay’s Civil Service
by Kregg Hetherington

This paper is a study of civil service reform in Paraguay during the tumultuous government of Fernando Lugo (2008–2012). On its own merits, the reform was one of the government’s greatest successes. But in this paper, I show that it also had inadvertent effects that were detrimental to the rural poor, or campesinos, who made up a major portion of Lugo’s political coalition. I argue that Lugo’s campesino allies, in fact, lost twice as a result of this reform. The first loss was perhaps predictable. By insisting on merit-based civil service appointments over patronage appointments, Lugo’s government made it harder for those with lower levels of education to accede to the traditional short-term benefits of electoral victory: government jobs. The second loss was more subtle. By creating an implicit division between experts and clients in the civil service, and by putting a premium on the former, Lugo’s government participated in increasing the influence of campesinos’ primary enemies, the massive soy farms that were overtaking the agrarian frontier.

The Paraguayan election of 2008 ushered in a fascinating experiment in governance as well as one of the most dramatic political upheavals in what has been called Latin America’s “left turn” (Levitsky and Roberts 2013). Before that election, Paraguay had been run for 61 years by the Colorado Party, a formidable clientelist machine that seeped into all aspects of society. Even after a coup in 1989 deposed the region’s longest-ruling dictator, Alfredo Stroessner, and after his replacement instituted regular democratic elections in 1992, the Colorados had remained virtually uncontested in national politics, controlling the executive and both houses of Congress for 15 years. When they were finally defeated, it was by the most unexpected of adversaries, a soft-spoken socialist ex-bishop from a rural parish, with no formal party structure backing him up. Fernando Lugo campaigned primarily on an anti-corruption and social justice platform. His backers were diverse and had different hopes for his government. But one of the core premises holding together his electoral coalition was the idea that, by displacing deeply entrenched political structures that hobbled the state’s regulatory apparatus, they might help to address the increasing social and environmental problems brought on by a booming agrarian sector. As I argue in this article, though, anti-corruption and rural redistribution are peculiar bedfellows, and Lugo’s experiment underlined the tensions between them.

Lugo’s victory was achieved through a coalition of three distinct political groups whose interests were very difficult to reconcile. The first was the Authentic Radical Liberal Party (henceforth “Liberals”), the Colorados’ traditional rival, which was structured in very much the same way. The Liberals had joined the coalition opportunistically as Lugo’s electoral possibilities increased, seeing their first chance to regain power since 1947. The second group were urban anti-corruption activists and the intellectual left, a group I call “new democrats.” And the third, always the strongest of Lugo’s supporters, were peasant or campesino organizations struggling for land on the eastern frontier. These latter two groups became the backbone of what Paraguayans called “Luguismo,” but their relationship was always a tense one. In my book about transparency politics during the democratic transition (Hetherington 2011), I argued that new democrats had trouble allying with campesinos because the former tended to regard the latter as either romanticized victims of corruption or the bearers of corruption’s cultural roots. This was most evident with campesinos who successfully moved into urban professional circles but remained somewhat suspect in the eyes of their new peers. That Lugo was able to appeal to both of these constituencies simultaneously was part of what made him an unusual and powerful political figure.

To explain what brought campesinos and new democrats together behind Lugo, I need to place one more actor in the frame. Campesino politics had been defined for generations by the struggle for land (Pastore 1972), but in recent years that struggle had come to be dominated by the boom in soybean production. Lugo understood this, and his government participated in increasing the influence of campesinos’ primary enemies, the massive soy farms that were overtaking the agrarian frontier. This was one of the main reasons I returned to Paraguay to research Lugo’s government, because everything I had learned in the years before then made his victory seem extremely unlikely. The research for this paper is part of a larger project on soybeans and politics in Paraguay and took place between 2010 and 2016. It included several periods of fieldwork in different government ministries as well as over 50 interviews with Lugo government workers both during and after his presidency.

Kregg Hetherington is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of Concordia University (1455 de Maisonneuve Boulevard W, H–1125–43, Montreal, Quebec H3G 1M8, Canada [kregg.hetherington@concordia.ca]). This paper was submitted 6 IV 17, accepted 25 X 17, and electronically published 19 II 18.
production, which was the primary motor of environmental and social problems in rural areas. Since the introduction in 1999 of Monsanto’s Roundup Ready soybeans, megafarms owned principally by Brazilian migrants had been dramatically reshaping rural life, rapidly reconcentrating land ownership, forcibly displacing indigenous and campesino farmers, destroying the forests, and bathing the country in pesticides. According to many, the soy industry’s most devastating advances were only possible because a corrupt government allowed the industry to flagrantly disregard environmental and social regulations. New democrats argued, therefore, that there was a direct connection between anti-corruption and campesino interests. By removing the Colorado Party’s client networks from the regulatory bureaucracy, they would be able to force the industry to obey social and environmental laws and improve the living conditions of those who lived near industrial farms.

Luguismo ultimately failed to unite the interests of campesinos and new democrats and caused a predictable split in the coalition after Lugo himself was thrown out in a coup in 2012. In this paper, I explore some of the mechanisms through which this failure happened, focusing on how the civil service reforms played out in several of the state offices responsible for regulating agricultural production, which I will refer to here simply as “regulatory agencies.” I argue that Lugo’s campesino allies, in fact, lost twice as a result of this reform. The first loss was perhaps predictable. By insisting on merit-based civil service appointments over patronage appointments, Lugo’s government made it harder for those with lower levels of education, such as campesinos, to accede to the traditional short-term benefits of electoral victory: government jobs. The second loss was more subtle. By creating an implicit division between experts and clients in the civil service, and by putting a premium on the former, Lugo’s government participated in increasing soy’s influence over the Paraguayan state. The story of this failure has much to tell us about the way that bureaucratic reform serves to reconfigure relations of inequality and mechanisms of redistribution in ways that reach far beyond those envisioned or justified by government efficiency and anti-corruption. For better or for worse, reforms like this one disrupt clientelist redistribution mechanisms in favour of consolidating a new set of exclusionary class interests.

Shape of the Old Guard

To make sense of the reform task that Lugo and his allies set for themselves, I need to describe in some detail the political system which the 2008 election was supposed to have overthrown. The Colorado Party was part of a clientelist political system that had dominated political contests since the late nineteenth century. In the wake of the devastating war against Argentina and Brazil (1865–1870), occupying Argentine forces had passed a new constitution for the country and, over the course of the following decade, established two parties, Republicans (or Colorado) and Liberals, out of elite family factions in Asuncion (Lewis 1993). For the first half of the twentieth century, the state was controlled by the Liberal Party, who managed to cycle through 22 presidents between 1904 and 1940, as different factions of the party fought each other for access to public resources. The Colorados took control after a civil war in 1947, and although they began with factional instability similar to that which characterized the Liberals, by the late 1950s the party had consolidated around what became the longest dictatorship in South American history.

General Alfredo Stroessner turned the Colorado Party into a centralized, authoritarian organization with an extensive system of patron-client relationships for maintaining allegiance to the party. Under Stroessner, both patronage and surveillance were controlled by hundreds of regional offices called seccionales and many more sub-seccionales, which were distributed throughout the country (Setrini 2010). By the 1960s, the party effectively controlled public service employment and all government benefit programs, including the popular rural colonization program that created hundreds of new peasant communities in which the modern campesino movement is now based. In other words, although it did not receive the same sort of scholarly attention as the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) in Mexico (Gutmann 2002; Hilgers 2008) and Peronismo in Argentina (Auyero 2001; Stokes 2005), Stroessner’s Colorados were a shining example of what came to be called “machine politics.” The party’s client networks reached into all aspects of Paraguayan society, making it as much a cultural phenomenon as a political or economic one (Hicks 1971). This is why, after the first elections in 1992, the Colorado Party was able to maintain power for nearly another two decades, mobilizing the same client supporters now as voters.

Democratization did, however, affect the structure of the party and the bureaucracy in at least two key ways. The first was that it reduced the control of the party seccionales over many traditional patronage goods, such as land, which had the effect of increasing the value of civil service appointments as patronage rewards. Over time, patronage appointments themselves were no longer controlled by seccionaleros. Instead, prospective employees had to present themselves directly to higher-ranking civil servants in the party. In a curious way, this made public agencies all the more partisan, since employers in the civil service no longer answered to party bosses when they made hiring decisions but instead became the de facto party

2. For the sake of space, I will speak about these agencies generically throughout the paper, but they include five agencies where I carried out fieldwork during Lugo’s government: SENAVE (Servicio Nacional de Calidad y Sanidad Vegetal), the INTIN (Instituto Nacional de Tecnología y Normalización), SEAM (Secretaría del Medio Ambiente), INDERT (Instituto Nacional de Desarrollo Rural y de Tierra), and IPTA (Instituto Paraguayo de la Tecnología Agraria). These five agencies (and a handful of others) apply standards and issue certificates necessary for all large-scale agricultural production in the country.

3. This figure includes a brief revolutionary respite when the Febrerista Party took control in 1936–1937.
bosses themselves, as the hierarchy of the party and the hierarchy of the civil service melded. So entrenched was the system that, by the time Lugo came to power, everyone still spoke openly about the need to find oneself a *patrón* in the civil service to get access to government jobs.

In regulatory agencies, this top-down model of clientelism could easily be complemented by a bottom-up system of bribery, where front-line functionaries collected sums from those seeking an agency’s services and then passed some of the amounts collected up the patronage hierarchy. One of the clearest signs of this activity appeared routinely in the year preceding any election, when the heads of key agencies were switched out for known political operatives with no expertise in the governing role in question. That is, even patronage which was not directly related to civil service appointments, like gifts made during elections, was made possible by clientelist networks in the bureaucracy, as these gathered the funds that would then be redistributed.

The second effect was that, with Stroessner out of the way, Colorados fractured into several competing currents, each following different strongmen vying in internal party elections for control of different parts of the patronage system. Until 2008, it was generally accepted in Paraguay that it was the Colorado Party primaries, rather than the general election, that chose the next president. Internal conflict transformed the party into what Gustavo Setrini (2010) calls “pluralistic clientelism,” characterized by considerable fluidity in the channels of patronage rewards. This made patronage much more competitive, and as alliances shifted in the party, patrons were shifted around the bureaucracy. According to Paraguay’s civil service law, functionaries cannot be fired, which means that appointments create a more or less durable foothold for different client networks in the bureaucracy, but with every change at the top of the bureaucracy, new clients are installed throughout the hierarchy to offset the influence of old clients. Movement of patrons multiplied patronage appointments. During the 1990s, when structural adjustment was making most governments in the region trim the civil service, Paraguay’s civil service expanded by close to 50% (see Nickson and Lambert 2002:165).

To be fair, the Paraguayan state was still small by most regional standards. But what public sector employment had been created by the attempts to improve state services had become remarkably inefficient,4 with legions of government workers doing almost no actual work. In Paraguay, these employees are referred to as *planilleros*, because they show up in the payroll (*la planilla*) but not at work. So common is this practice that every reform finds thousands of government employees who have no office or who work many different jobs in different parts of the country. Unable to fire employees who were untrustworthy, political bosses resorted to moving functionaries to *el freezer*, a civil service no-man’s land in which people continued to receive a salary but were effectively stripped of any duties, power, or access to information. The Ministry of Finance actually maintained two whole buildings for only this purpose. In other words, the ranks of planilleros across the civil service were bloated not only with opportunists taking advantage of hollow appointments but also with functionaries whose appointments were made hollow by a change in the political winds.

Far from being an aberration, this kind of clientelism in the halls of the bureaucracy was a key part of a form of systematic redistribution of state resources and was seen by most Paraguayans as the normal channel for accessing jobs, services, and benefits. This is key to any clientelist system, that on top of being the only viable way to access state resources, it becomes so ingrained in the fabric of people’s social and familial lives that it is virtually impossible to imagine oneself outside of it.5 This is not the same as saying that everyone thought the system was legal or good. For instance, among bureaucrats, it was considered slightly forward to ask someone who their *patrón* was, and this was often a way of teasing fellow workers. The question of for whom someone was collecting (*recaudando*) was always whispered behind people’s backs.6 But very few people were in a position to imagine a way of changing these systemic practices.

**How to Fix the Civil Service**

A group of staunch reformers had been trying to overhaul this system since the waning years of the Stroessner dictatorship. The theory of bureaucracy that underwrote their project was emblematic of post–Cold War liberalism, which saw government corruption as one of the primary problems impeding democratic transitions. It was tightly aligned with the normative prescriptions of the Inter-American Development Bank, US Agency for International Development, World Bank, and especially Transparency International, which consistently ranked Paraguay as one of the most corrupt countries on earth.7 I have

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4. Cortázar Velarde et al. 2014. The same report measures an “index of civil service development” for 2004 that awarded Paraguay the lowest score in the region after Honduras and El Salvador.


6. Bribery was a much more difficult practice for me to collect direct data on, since few people would give details about their own bribe-taking practices, although my research was helped by the fact that, under the Lugo administration, many old functionaries were at least capable of claiming that, while they had taken bribes in the past, they no longer did.

7. Much of the political science literature that I draw on makes a technical distinction between corruption (the use of public goods for private ends) and clientelism (the distribution of public goods for electoral ends). Like most anthropologists (e.g., Gupta 1995; Hasty 2005; Muir 2016; Smith 2010), I favor a reading of corruption as the broad discourse of political accusation, which includes clientelism. Thus, even while they make a distinction between corruption and clientelism as phenomena, I see the normative work on clientelism as part of a larger liberal project that often
been using "new democrats" to serve as an identifying shorthand to refer to these reformers, but beyond the long-standing core of political reformers, the project of combating clientelism could be espoused by almost anyone in Paraguay at different moments. Because the anti-corruption project is hegemonic, most new democrats do not consider themselves a group apart, and yet they recognize each other through a consensual opposition to "traditional" Paraguayan political and cultural traits that are considered backward or harmful, like clientelism or authoritarianism. In other words, campesinos, Colorados, and other groups can become new democrats to the extent that they denounce these sorts of practices, but making a complete shift is difficult for these groups that continue to embody or perform aspects of the very traditions that new democracy opposes.

Like so many governmental models aimed at improving states in places like Paraguay, the literature on combating clientelism in the civil service begins with a just-so story about Europe and North America. Much of it explicitly refers back to Weber’s description of the rationalization of bureaucracy under capitalism (Grindle 1992; Weber 1946). Since the late 1880s, the rise of the career civil service in the United States and Europe was supposed to limit the discretionary appointment of functionaries, creating a civil service hired according to its technical skills rather than its political connections. Of course, all governments are composed in part by political appointees but, the argument goes, a state functions more efficiently and is more responsive to the public good when these appointees are limited to ministerial appointments and their close advisors (see Evans and Rauch 1999; Pritchard and Woolcock 2004; World Bank 1997). This has the advantage of reducing not only private control over public resources but also the bureaucratic bloat of underqualified functionaries.

The difficulty, though, with meritocratic reform is that patronage appointments are such a flexible and powerful tool for incumbent governments that they are very hard to give up (Grindle 2012): not only does civil service reform take away one’s ability to attract electoral supporters (as clients), it also runs the danger of alienating the very clients that got one into power to begin with. All governments promise to be less corrupt than the last one but find themselves in this basic double bind. It therefore takes peculiar political alignments to carry it out successfully. Christian Schuster (2014) argues that Lugo’s government was just such an alignment, because his victory was not created by a preexisting political machine, and his alliance did not, therefore, generate systematic clientelist obligations. We will see in the next section why this quality was quite uneven across Lugo’s alliance. But suffice it to say that an important part of Lugo’s inner circle were in a position to carry out a reform of this sort.

The reforms turned out to be quite dramatic. Availed of this historic opportunity, Lugo appointed Lilian Soto to the position of minister of the civil service. Soto had a master’s degree in public administration from a school in the United States and a long history of advocating civil service reform, and unlike many Luguistas, she did not see such reform as a means to the end of justice in the countryside per se but as a principled end in itself. And she had a very clear idea of how to carry it out. In her reading, the laws regarding the civil service were already up to international standards, after having undergone a complete overhaul in 2000, which stipulated (among other things) that civil service appointments and promotion were to be undertaken through open contests overseen by her ministry. As in many parts of Latin America (see Grindle 2012), the problem was not in the written law but in the fact that nobody followed it. To give just the most telling figure, in the year before Lugo’s presidency, the Secretariat of Public Service had overseen precisely seven open contests for civil service appointments. Soto took over the portfolio with gusto, aiming to increase the number of such contests as rapidly as possible, and in the final year of Lugo’s presidency, without having changed a word of the law, her office oversaw close to 13,710 such contests (Secretaría de la Función Pública 2011:68).

Not surprisingly, revolutionizing the appointment process took a lot of tactical work and political elbow grease. As the plan developed, it became clear that certain ministries and agencies would be much easier to work with than others. The ministries least amenable to reform were those that were controlled by the Liberal Party as rewards for their participation in Lugo’s coalition, and this included some of the most important parts of the state, like the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Public Works, and the Itaipu hydro dam. Of the rest of the ministries and agencies, the ones that cooperated best with the reform fell into two fairly predictable categories. First, they were headed by someone with whom Soto had a good working relationship (usually someone who was part of an inner circle of Luguistas who saw bureaucratic reform as a priority), and second, they were agencies that already had something of a history of merit-based appointments, because many of their functions were technical in nature. So, for instance, the Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Education, which fit both of these criteria, jumped on board with reforms. Other technical institutions, such as the Ministry of Finance and some regulatory agencies (Agricultural Extension, Finance and some regulatory agencies (Agricultural Extension, Finance and some regulatory agencies (Agricultural Extension,
the Secretariat of the Environment, and SENAVE), all participated but with more mixed results, sometimes improvising methods of which Soto herself disapproved. What united all of these institutions was a long history of hiring professionally credentialed workers, which meant that they already had a certain infrastructure and culture of hiring based on merit.

My first argument in this paper is that these two qualities of reformable institutions (trust in the top civil servants appointed to run the agencies, and preference for specialized technical posts over nontechnical ones) colored not only the way the reform was carried out but also some of its less obvious consequences for the rural poor. It is not merely that they moved the state toward a more technocratic model of governance but rather that the specific social distribution of trust and expertise favored certain groups and processes over others.

Trust in Experts

Luguistas were hardly the first to evaluate alliances in the bureaucracy in the language of confianza, or “trust.” The Law of the Civil Service calls all discretionary appointments cargos de confianza and is very clear about the limitation of discretionary appointments to the very top positions in state agencies.10 But in the agencies where I did fieldwork, it was clear that confianza was a much more generalized term for describing alliances between functionaries and that people even used the term “cargos de confianza” to refer metaphorically to appointments that did not meet the legal definition.

One of the most unsettling aspects of fieldwork in the Paraguayan state was the degree to which different factions of the civil service would openly conspire against each other to assure the ascension of their patron through the ranks. My favorite of these moments was at a supper with several agricultural inspectors who were on a field project together, where someone proposed a toast to the imminent specters who were on a looking for opportunities to subvert regulatory tightening. The only way to establish some sort of control over the agencies was for their presidents to appoint a number of close friends as advisors in cargos de confianza, who then recruited from within their own networks of trust. It is hard to quibble with the general principle of it, particularly when they were trying to get a rapid grip on extremely hostile organizations. In fact, as Schuster (2014) points out, it is not uncommon for reformist governments to go through a period of “meritocratic patronage” in which the expectation of credentials is clearly in place, even though the pattern of hiring friends looks a lot like that which preceded it. This is not to say that there was not any difference between Lugo’s civil servants and those before them, despite what some Colorados and Liberals might claim (we will get to some of the differences below). But the practices were not quite as different as they seemed to the reformists, or as Soto would have liked.

This makes the second criterion for reformers all the more interesting, if more subtle. In institutions like SENAVE, even before the reform, there was a very clear split between administrative and technical sections of the bureaucracy. In many of these institutions, the organigrama itself reflected this split, with the bureaucracy divided into administrative and technical sections, each with different pay structures, appointment

procedures, and unions. As the head of one of these agencies put it to me days after his appointment:

Look, we have over 400 employees. Of those, 150 are technicians who work in agriculture-related activities. After that, there are 20 in the legal and financial administration. The rest should be our army for inspections and for administrative support. But at least 200 of these administrators were hired as part of the Colorado regime’s prebendary practices. And that’s our straightjacket. Because these are civil servants, and the rigid labour rights make them more untouched than nobility.

In all of these agencies, technical positions required some sort of independent credential—a degree in agronomy, chemistry, entomology, or biology, and often a further certification to become an inspector or licensor. This meant that all of these positions were, to some degree, merit based, even though hiring very predictably broke down along patronage lines in the institution. By contrast, all but the very top administrative positions required no credentials at all. As a result, appointments here were more nakedly clientelistic and confirmed the normative distinction between the political and the technical.

The offhand joke about nobility, though, is very telling. On the one hand, it flags the history of bureaucratic reform in which new democrats assumed they were participating. On the other hand, it sarcastically inverts the class position of the majority of the people they wished they could fire. In fact, part of the legibility of technicians to reformers comes from shared cultural capital. Like new democrats, educated technicians speak the same language of professionalism and competence, of dress and comportment, and they tend to share a commitment to at least the Weberian aesthetic of office life.12 They are, to put it another way, transparent in relation to the marked political presence of unqualified secretaries, chauffeurs, and paper pushers. For new democrats, the technically trained civil servant may have entered their post through a suspect patrón, but they were redeemable since, at some level, they appeared to share the values of the reformer. More than anything, what they shared was class.

Indeed, one way to read all of this is to say that, if Paraguay’s civil service has historically worked to consolidate vertical alliances between patrons and clients in competing political factions, the reformed system tended to consolidate horizontal ties between members of the professional middle-class workers to the exclusion of business elites and less educated workers. That is a pattern we can see broadly in anti-corruption campaigns, where the practices of the lower- and street-level bureaucrats become labeled as corrupt, whereas those of the professional classes are considered forms of social capital. In this volume of Current Anthropology, Osburg (2018) and Smart (2018) both offer important examples from China, where successful campaigns against vertical distribution practices like petty bribery are accompanied by the rise of middle-class entertaining aid to consolidate horizontal alliances between business people and bureaucrats. Others, including Gupta (2012) and Muir (2016), show the various ways that transparency and corruption discourses help to consolidate a middle-class identity in aspiring liberal democracies.13

For all the rhetoric about doing things differently, there is no question that the Lugo administration provided leftist new democrats with a bonanza in government jobs unlike anything they had seen before. A large group of people who knew each other through their work in nongovernmental organizations and the arts now moved together into government jobs. Many of these people admitted that their only real reason for having a job was that they were friends with someone, and most were wryly open about having found, or lost, a Luguista patrón. There are, however, important distinctions to note here. On the one hand, Luguista patterns of hiring were generally more horizontal than Colorado ones, with jobs being distributed among friends without as clear a sense of paternalistic dependency as was practiced by the traditional parties. On the other hand, its aversion to clientelist requests from people who did not belong to professional circles invariably produced new forms of exclusion of those who had no clear professional reason for accessing jobs. This it not to say that this effect was intentional. Soto’s ministry was even careful to insist that merit was not the same as credential, for precisely this reason. But the appointment of trusted colleagues to certain positions, the open contests based on merit, and the focus on technical expertise all had the structural effect, at least for a short time, of rendering much of the civil service a site for the reproduction of the urban middle class.

“Traditional” Clients of Luguismo

Luguismo was a crossover space where people from quite different backgrounds could ally and shift around, and it was therefore an interesting place to see how boundaries between certain kinds of people reasserted themselves. Because anticorruption was such a key part of what kept Luguismo together, cases of corruption were one of the places where tensions between Lugo’s allies erupted. It is important to remember the basic tripartite coalition that brought Lugo to power: urban

12. In Paraguay, “speaking the same language” of professionalism is often quite literal, since grammatical competence in Spanish (as opposed to rural Guarani and various forms of mixing known as Jopara) is one of the key markers of higher education.

13. The relation between class and patron-client relations is a topic of longstanding debate in anthropology, with Gilsenan (1977) arguing that they were the same thing and Rothstein (1979) suggesting that patron-client systems arise directly from particular class formations. Alongside the work of people like Lemarchand (1972) and Witsoe (2013), I suggest that elements of class and ethnic politics can combine with clientelist systems in distinct ways. It seems likely, however, that the attack on clientelist relations to the exclusion of a broader examination of relations of inequality in any social formation is likely to result in new patterns of exclusion and marginalization (even while it may remedy others), as it does in this study.
social democrats, campesinos, and the Liberal Party. And as I have already noted, it was always easier for some of these people to assert their anti-corruption bona fides than it was for others. The Liberal Party was already a clientelist machine coming into the government, well practiced in the arts of doling out patronage but without previous access to executive plums. Their entry into the Luguista coalition was based on being rewarded with executive positions, with the explicit intention of building their electoral machine within the bureaucracy. Two technical agencies that I worked in experienced this directly, because Lugo initially appointed Liberals to head the agencies, before removing them and putting new democrats in charge. On the first day of my research, one of my Luguista friends told me something that I would hear repeated across a variety of institutions for the following two years. "The Colorados you can work with, they're more reasonable. They're used to playing the game. It's the Liberals you have to watch out for. They are desperate and shameless. They're just trying to steal everything they can while they can to try to get into power next time." Animosity was clearly mutual. Almost every Liberal I met in a bureaucratic position insisted that they were not Luguista but rather Liberals in a marriage of convenience. And almost every Luguista I met was horrified by the clientelist comportment of their governing partners.

Still, Liberals were in some ways the least of the new democrats' worries, as their actions in the bureaucracy surprised no one. What was far more troubling were the rumors, and eventually public accusations, that some of their rural allies were engaging in the same forms of corruption as Colorados and Liberals. A number of scandals erupted in 2011 in key Luguista institutions. One of the more serious centered on a man I will refer to as Dario, who had been placed by one of Lugo’s inner circle in the human resources department of a certification agency. Dario’s position allowed him access to the administrative wing of the institution and to teams of Colorado middlemen who were suspected of being experienced bribe takers. For some time, Dario hid his activities (often by actually hiding it) from his immediate superiors, constructing their electoral machine within the bureaucracy. Two technical agencies that I worked in experienced this directly, because Lugo initially appointed Liberals to head the agencies, before removing them and putting new democrats in charge. On the first day of my research, one of my Luguista friends told me something that I would hear repeated across a variety of institutions for the following two years. "The Colorados you can work with, they’re more reasonable. They’re used to playing the game. It’s the Liberals you have to watch out for. They are desperate and shameless. They’re just trying to steal everything they can while they can to try to get into power next time.”

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Many of Dario’s critics believed he was being protected by a man named Sixto Pereira, a Luguista senator suspected by new democrats of engaging in old-style political practices. Pereira was the first campesino leader to be elected to the Senate from outside of the main party structures, and he was by far Lugo’s most important rural ally. An extraordinarily able politician, Pereira moved comfortably among campesino communities, development organizations, lawyers’ offices, and the bully pulpit. He was closely associated with a new conditional cash transfer program called Tekopora, which, although purportedly universal in its application, was run by campesino organizations and often had a distinct partisan appeal built into it. The scandal that erupted around Dario was only one of many unproven accusations that he was “recaudando” through bureaucratic appointments. Whatever the actual substance of what Pereira was up to (I doubt that he was guilty of many of the specific accusations against him), the increasing accusations against him were clearly a symptom of tensions between urban and rural movements in the Luguista coalition. It is hardly surprising that, when part of Lugo’s coalition became tied up in a clientelism scandal, it arose from the rural part of the coalition. As a form of accusation, clientilism always sticks more to peasants than to technocrats.

Since clientilism was first described in the 1950s, it has been a central topic of debate among anthropologists as to whether it is a specifically rural phenomenon. Early studies of rural Spain by Julian Pitt-Rivers (1954) and of Mexico by Eric Wolf (1957) and Sydney Mintz (Mintz and Wolf 1950) all focused on the importance of compadrazgo (co-parenthood) to Catholic communities, which offered a structure whereby peasants of different class status could form ongoing bonds of asymmetrical reciprocity. Paraguayan campesinos even made an appearance in this literature, when Service and Service (1954) described clientilism in their study of a Paraguayan village as part of their argument that Guarani-speaking peasants were representatives of Europe’s past:

[T]ypical peasant attitudes are those we associate with Europe before the spread of the “protestant” or “capitalist” ethic. . . . We never discovered any sentiment among the peasants that hard work and intelligent management or enterprise could achieve other than a small and ephemeral reward. . . . The conception that economic improvement can be achieved only through the aid or influence of a patrón is also very prevalent, in spite of the fact that for many years there have been no agricultural haciendas. The most usual response from a peasant who is queried about his economic and technological difficulties is not that he needs a steel plow, better seed or a yoke of oxen, but that he needs a good patrón who will help him. (124–125)

These sorts of descriptions were picked up in the 1960s by political scientists as ways to describe political networks in modernizing countries (Powell 1970; Scott 1969).

14. This is not a direct quote, but a distillation of an oft-repeated line among Luguistas.

15. He was therefore a quintessential crossover character, key to holding Lugo’s coalition together, the sort of person I profiled in my book Guerrilla Auditors (2011).

16. The entire experience of Tekopora is worthy of another study. It was a version of the better-known Bolsa Familia in Brazil, which many laud as a model for bypassing client structures in delivering social goods (Nichter 2014). Ansell (2014) has shown that, despite this, even Bolsa Familia gave rise to new patron-client relationships, and Tekopora was largely the same.
Even while many of these early studies centered on urban areas, one of the most common explanations for urban clientelism, especially in Latin America, was that it was a transplant brought by rural migrants into rapidly industrializing centers like Buenos Aires and Mexico City (Germani 1968) or a “vestige” of premodernism (Powell 1970). This belief about clientelism’s rural character is still alive and well in Paraguay. Self-deprecating descriptions of peasant culture still form a strong basis for national self-analysis, and clientilism is still “blamed” on peasants in popular national anthropology. The quote above, from Service and Service (1954), appears in a working paper by a progressive political scientist trying to explain the difficulties that Lugo had in overcoming clientelism among his rural supporters (Setrini 2010:11).

It was very easy, therefore, for new democrats to diagnose their discomfort with Pereira as evidence of a rural cultural problem. This is not to say that they were entirely without sympathy. In an interview about clientelism with Christian Schuster in 2012 (shortly before Lugo’s ouster), one of Lugo’s new democrat allies put it this way:

Lugo was facing a poor and disorganized society that—despite having elected him on a platform of public goods—demanded access to clientelist goods after the election. For example, when Sixto Pereira . . . returned to the communities where he had campaigned on these public goods, many of them would confront him with “this is our moment, our turn . . . to enter [the government].” (Schuster 2014:41; my translation)

Somehow, by claiming that only Pereira’s supporters are clamoring for public goods, this quote elides the fact that urban professional Luguistas were doing the same. New democrats could appoint their friends to bureaucratic positions and call it “merit,” precisely because the cultural capital that defined their group to begin with was based on credentialing. Almost by definition, campesinos did not have the kind of merits that would make them competitive in the new civil service that Lugo’s government was creating. Denied the excuse of merit in asking for patronage, then, campesinos’ requests for state resources, such as social assistance through Tekopora, agricultural credit relief, or distribution of agricultural tools and inputs, all bore the sheen of old-school patronage, which new democrats abhorred. My point here is that Pereira was in a double influence but could not understand how he could maintain that influence in the countryside without resorting to traditional clientelist practices. But if he did so, their political worldview tended to see his actions, and those of his supporters, as evidence of moral failure.

Government of Beans

It is now time to bring those beans back into the picture. As I warned at the outset, the beans disappeared from the paper because they do not appear within any of the official discussions of civil service reform. But among campesino Luguistas, and for people like Pereira who represented them in government, the beans were never far outside of the frame. Civil service reform was always seen as one of many governmental tools meant to slow the soy frontier and all of the social and environmental problems that it brought with it. And as Lugo’s government progressed, and especially after he was removed from power, it became increasingly clear that soy was completely unbothered by anything the new government did. My final argument in this paper is that, on the contrary, soy may, in fact, have benefited from fixing the civil service.

In the decade leading up to Lugo’s election, campesinos had managed to get even their most urban of leftist allies to acknowledge soybeans as a powerful and destructive political actor (Hetherington 2013). In the traditional political bases of campesino movements, the expanding soy frontier was the single issue that most clearly articulated a set of political problems: the loss of land and jobs; rising rural inequality; increasingly violent struggles over territory; loss of cultural and national sovereignty; contamination of air, soil, and water; the highest levels of deforestation in the world; and increased health problems, to name only the biggest issues. The point of articulation with bureaucratic reform was based on the premise that a better-regulated industry would likely be less profitable but would certainly be less destructive. And a few years after Lugo’s fall, it is clear that this promise was also one of its most spectacular failures.

One of the reasons for this failure was the privileged place of the technician in Paraguay’s civil service reform and the way that it complimented the rendering technical of the state’s regulatory apparatus. It would be hard to quibble with the basic assumption that, to enforce environmental regulations, you need sufficient chemists, soil scientists, epidemiologists, and plant biologists on the government payroll. But this is not the only purpose that scientists serve in state agencies. In fact, before Lugo came to power, the state was already being pushed to increase its technical capacity in response to the new kinds of objects that government needed to address: not just the destruction caused by soybeans but also the very scaling up of soybean monocrops, dependent on complex technical and logistical infrastructure of the kind Paraguay had never before seen. Most of the agencies I have been describing in this paper were created between 2000 and 2004 by intense lobbying efforts from soy farmers who knew they would be incapable of expanding exports if they were not able to certify their compliance with international standards (Hetherington 2014).

In my interviews with soy farmers and lobbyists, almost all of whom professed a deep animosity toward Lugo’s government after it was in power, many claimed to have voted for Lugo. Most of them shared with new democrats the normative premises of civil service reform and saw Lugo’s election as the fruition of their own attempts at building the governance infrastructure they needed. In other words, rendering the state technical not only generated civil service jobs for educated professionals but also created an implicit alliance between new democrats and the soy industry in the emergence of middle-class business mores. If soy farmers grew to hate Lugo quickly
after he assumed the presidency, it was not because he was rendering things technical, but because of the patronage appointments that brought environmentalists and campesino activists into the regulatory apparatus. Explaining their original support for Lugo and their turn back to supporting the Croatados, most soy farmers treated both as equally corrupt. If they are going to be corrupt, they told me repeatedly, in retrospect, they preferred the mald conocido, the devil you know.

Not only was the soy industry not threatened by rendering the bureaucracy technical, their support for this move was structured into the very fabric of Paraguayan training programs. One of the obvious problems with suddenly expanding the technical capacity of one’s civil service is finding all of the properly trained employees who can assume these roles. But despite the fact that Paraguay’s university system is notoriously underfunded, the new requirements of the civil service were able to pull on an expanding training infrastructure that had been built, in part, by the soy industry itself. Private investment in the production of agrarian inputs, processing, and shipping, not to mention companies selling machinery and private consulting, had already created a growing demand for technicians. The earliest generation of these technicians (beginning in the late 1990s) had often been imported from Brazilian universities by the Brazilian settlers who dominated the soy boom. But since the mid-2000s, new funding opportunities for studying in Paraguay had created a new generation of professionally trained agronomists and laboratory technicians born and educated in Paraguay, trained by and for the private sector, which had begun to finance scientific education programs.

Alongside their investments in the state’s regulatory capacity, the soy industry began, in 2004, to fund basic research through national agronomy programs, scholarships for studying abroad, and grants to scientists in the state’s agricultural technology system. Initially, they did this through a foundation called InBio, which between 2004 and 2010 became the most important source of funding for beleaguered crop scientists. Many of these scientists, even those critical of the soy sector, credited InBio with saving public research from near oblivion in the late 1990s and creating a new generation of Paraguayan science students. InBio was so closely tied to the soy industry’s primary lobby group, the UGP (Union de Gremios Productivos), that they shared the same office building and many of the same staff. Perhaps most ironically, InBio’s primary source of funding was the royalties paid for the use of Monsanto’s patented Roundup Ready soybeans, the reviled technology at the center of campesino discontent in the countryside. In other words, it was this generation of science students, directly funded and created by soybeans themselves, who most benefited from the boom in technical civil service jobs.

None of this is to say that the experts hired out of InBio-funded programs were incapable of applying their knowledge in a disinterested way or that all of them responded in lockstep to the interests of soy. Most of this generation of young employees seemed capable and sincere, indeed professional. My own appreciation of this professionalism is, of course, not objective either. I too share the kind of class background, education, and comportment that makes me more comfortable in the presence of new democrats than strongmen and their operators. In contrast with how I felt after my meetings with older Colorado bureaucrats—some of whom were kind and competent, but many of whom would also breathlessly yell over my questions, redirecting the conversation to talk about how much better things had been under Stroessner, or about how I really needed to get more pussy—I often came out of meetings with young chemists and biologists feeling like the state was in good hands. These young women and men were motivated by the objects of their technical attention (whether plants, samples, or machinery) rather than by the machinations of political parties, and they carried out their jobs with the kind of intellectual curiosity that I found both familiar and refreshing. That familiarity is, of course, part of the very same phenomenon that made them implicit allies of many new democrat Luguistas.

But one could also forgive outsiders to the technical professions for being alarmed at how much influence Monsanto and other multinationals seemed to have bought in the creation of this new technical class. From this perspective, the civil service was becoming a site not only for the reproduction of a nascent middle class based in Asuncion but also for the construction of a whole new class whose careers revolved around servicing the soy industry. It would be glib to say that the new soybean clientelism is the same as Colorado clientelism, in which people depend on maintaining a good relationship with the local strongman in order to secure access to education, agricultural credit, and public sector jobs. But there are important similarities that normative definitions of corruption and clientelism tend to overlook. Replacing one form of redistribution with another may help to diminish the appeals Paraguayans have to make to violent, masculine power figures. But it does so by systematically excluding another class of people who refuse to participate in the professional aesthetics favored by development agencies and agrarian multinationals. In the short term, in Paraguay, it turned out that anti-clientelism and anti-corruption often implicitly meant anti-campesino.

End of Luguismo

Four years after Lugo assumed the presidency, his hold on the executive still tenuous, he was deposed in a laughable impeachment engineered by defecting Liberals and the Colorado-controlled Congress. The electoral fallout was sadly predictable. Lugo’s coalition underwent a three-way split, with the Liberals
running alone, Lugo and Pereira running a party based in the countryside, and a breakaway group of urban new democrats led by a popular television personality running on an anti-corruption platform. All three groups were spectacularly defeated by the returning Colorado, whose client networks had been harmed but not fundamentally displaced from the bureaucracy. Nonetheless, when I ask middle-class Paraguayans today what lasting good came of the Lugo years, many will point to the professionalization of the civil service as one of the only welcome remainders. In fact, one of the biggest surprises of the new Colorado administration was that it has continued meritorocratic hiring practices initiated by Soto, often insisting that professionalization was a Colorado initiative to begin with.

So it is worth asking whether professionalization of the civil service was not all part of another long-term transition in which expertise replaced client networks as the primary way that certain social groups remain in control of the state. I have shown how this particular dynamic benefited new democrats in the short term and left campesinos feeling as though they were in danger of being excluded from the benefits of electoral victory. This helps to explain the unraveling of Lugo’s coalition. But my main argument is that, in rendering the state technical, civil service reform inadvertently created the conditions for soy to increase its hold on government.

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