
EDITORIAL NOTE**On the Anthropology of Corruption**

The complexity and elusive nature of corruption makes an empirical investigation notoriously difficult; a task that is made more complicated by the ethnographer's encountering and having to account for not only corruption that breaks the law but also corruption that does not break the law or that is *made* to fall within the boundaries of the law.

Unlike other social scientists, anthropologists have generally stayed away from this topic. With a few exceptions (for example, Gupta's 'Blurred boundaries: the discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state', 1995 and the contributions in Pardo ed., *Morals of Legitimacy: Between Agency and System*, 2000 and in Pardo ed. *Between Morality and the Law: Corruption, Anthropology and Comparative Society* 2004), this has been the case, until recently. As what is becoming a sub-disciplinary field is rapidly growing, this seems an opportune time to encourage reflection on the complex issues involved in the ethnographically-based study of this topic; hence this Special Section.

While bribery, extortion, tax evasion and illicit exchanges of favours would seem to recur across different societies, there is considerable historical and ethnographic variation in the occurrence, dynamics and extension of corruption, in the perceptions of corruptness and in the interpretations of the legitimacy of corrupt acts. Ideas of what constitutes corrupt behaviour, the deceits of language by which corruption becomes routinized and the ways in which corruption and bribery are legally defined change in place and time. Steering clear of cultural relativism, corruption needs to be examined contextually and diachronically. In particular, attention needs to be paid to ambiguity in official definitions of what constitutes — morally *and* legally — illegitimate behaviour in public life. Anthropology has a unique contribution to make.

The two essays that follow testify that an in-depth investigation is an effort worth doing if the objective is to develop an analysis that moves beyond legalistic 'certainties'. They are reproduced here with the aim of encouraging discussion and, hopefully, stimulate further contributions from our readers.