

Editorial

Corruption and the Moral Economy of Fraud

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There is global consensus that corruption is one of the main ills in the globalized world, inhibiting development and preventing the solution of pressing problems. Corruption is also seen as a moral failing: former UN General Secretary Kofi Annan saw corruption as ‘evil and insidious’ (United Nations 1997) and Pope Francis stated that corruption is ‘evil’ and that it ‘offends human dignity’ (Francis 2017). Against this unquestionable evil, the remedy implemented worldwide is also moralistic in character – the ethics of transparency, accountability, and openness (Garsten & Jacobsson 2011). But as it has failed to deliver the desired results, and we need to look for other ways to understand corruption. While the solutions to the problems of corruption have been framed in the language of ethics, transparency and accountability - in many ways in the language of ‘audit cultures’, the practices of corruption are themselves underpinned by a moral culture which Whyte and Wiegatz call ‘the moral economy of fraud’ (Whyte & Wiegatz 2016). Not only is this culture profoundly criminogenic; but it could be claimed that it is precisely this moral economy of fraud that shapes the emerging global ethics of transparency, audit and compliance. For this special issue on *Corruption and the Moral Economy of Fraud* we have invited anthropological and interdisciplinary contributions in the hope of offering novel ways of conceptualising and understanding corruption through, among others, the lens of moral economies of fraud. Our goal has been to unsettle the dominant discourses on corruption informed largely by political science with its limited paradigm of ‘good governance’ and its focus on process, form and institutions. Each of the authors in this special issue has attempted to break away from the established in

her or his own way, thus forcing us to challenge the now hegemonic narratives of the global anti-corruption industry. We hope to explore these issues further in other forthcoming special issues and keep the conversation going.

Gian Marco Moisé investigates in his article, *Populism in Moldova's Political System*, the political debate in Moldova since 2015 which has been centred around the concept on corruption, albeit with a specific meaning in the post-Soviet context and one that goes beyond the usual 'abuse of public power for private gain'. Moisé argues that neither corruption or populism can be understood in this setting without taking into account the informal practices of the elites, and a 'cultural-political system predicated on abusing formal rules to achieve personal objectives' (p. 17). The article thus unsettles the prevalence of formality in research on corruption and politics and argues for the need of understanding the conflict between corruption and populism through the lens of informal practices, including the emergence of 'kleptocratic anarchy' and the use of *kompromat*, black PR and character assassinations, and the way they in turn shape a particular form of populist politics. **Blendi Kajsiu** in his contribution *Public or Private Corruption? The Ideological Dimensions of Anti-Corruption Discourses in Colombia, Ecuador and Albania* offers a summary of his key arguments in his book *¿Corrupción pública o privada? La dimensión ideológica de los discursos anti-corrupción en Colombia, Ecuador y Albania* (Bogotá: Tirant lo Blanch, 2020), for the English speaking audience. Kajsiu shows how what is often imagined as the same phenomenon becomes in practice articulated differently in these three countries, reflecting different ideological positions. Where the neoliberal governments of Colombia and Albania pursued the widespread notion of corruption primarily as abuse of public office, the government of Rafael Correa in Ecuador identified corruption primarily as a problem of the private sector which captures and distorts the public sector. The article in effect shows what holds true for many other 'anti-policies' as well (Walters 2008), namely that these are indeed deeply ideological even when often presented as technocratic and legitimised through references to science. The article points to the limits and troubles with the 'war on ...' mode of thinking and policies which need to be taken seriously in future debates on corruption. **Davide Casciano** draws us in his article, *Popular tales of Pastors, Luxury, Frauds and Corruption: Pentecostalism, Conspicuous Consumption, and the Moral Economy of Corruption in Nigeria*, into the world of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, where pastors have become trend setters and consumer stars indulging in luxury, which has become 'key to their social legitimacy as preachers of the Prosperity Gospel' (p. 52). At the same time, these consumerist indulgences do not go unnoticed, to the contrary, moral discourses on corruption and accusations of fakery and fraudulent schemes proliferate. The article offers an in-depth analysis of these discourses on 'corrupt pastors', pointing to the complexity of the notion of corruption as invoked by the critics, who also struggle to express discontent with the growing inequalities and opaque relations between corruption and conspicuous consumption among the emerging elites in Nigeria. **Cecil Marie Schou Pallesen** draws us in her article, *Making Friends and Playing the Game: The Moral Economy of Bribery Among Tanzanian Indians*, into the

world of Tanzanian Indian communities and the bribery relations they engage in to cope with the uncertainties of their everyday lives. Pallesen shows how these bribery relations can take the form of ‘playing the game’ or of ‘making friends’, relations that in turn can tell us a great deal about how the Tanzanian Indians view the state and its legitimacy as well as their own place within it; their ambivalent relation to the ‘game of bribery’ also reflects their ambivalent position in society and ‘encompasses affective negotiations of belonging and non-belonging’ (p. 88-9). The article thus shows us that the actual complexities of the legal, the moral and the ethical rarely lend themselves to the reductionist hegemonic anti-corruption discourses that dominate the realm of global policy making.

In the non-peer reviewed section, this special issue features an essay by **KP Sethunath**, *Political Servitude Taking Ride on Corporate Social Responsibility Bandwagon*, which offers a more journalistic account of the very interesting case of Twenty20, a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative by the Kitex Group business conglomerate in Kerala, which metamorphosed into a political entity and won the elections in 2015 to the local Grama Panchayat (GP). The Twenty20 narrative has died down following their defeat in 2021, but the case offers unique insights into how mainstream politics became rejected in favour of a corporate sponsored CSR entity and the persona of the Managing Director Sabu Jacob, breaking with the long tradition of egalitarian political impulses in Kerala and a reputation of voting for the communist party, while also highlighting the possible impacts of the convergence between right-wing political ideas and corporate-sponsored political entities.

This special issue features also two book reviews: **Jardar Østbø** reviewed *Navalny: Putin’s Nemesis, Russia’s Future?* by Jan Matti Dollbaum, Morvan Lallouet and Ben Noble and **Tereza Østbø Kuldova** reviewed *A Social Theory of Corruption: Notes from the Indian Subcontinent* by Sudhir Chella Rajan. We are also pleased to share an interesting interview with the artist **Andi Schmied**, conducted by **Tereza Østbø Kuldova** on her art project and book *Private Views* which investigates the luxury high-rise properties in New York to which Schmied gained access by posing as a Hungarian billionaire interested in buying and in the process documenting the views, interactions with real estate agents and the insides of these investment objects and associated with the transnational flows of illicit wealth, thus offering us unique insight into the privileged views of the elites, the loopholes they exploit and the hollowness of that surrounds them.

We are delighted to share with you this extremely rich and exciting special issue. We would like to express our thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their thorough engagement and critical work with all the contributions to this issue of the *Journal of Extreme Anthropology*. And thank you for reading!

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