Business, ethnography and the global economic crisis

Paradigm power in the African "corruption" debate

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to problematise the concept of corruption as it is used in the African context by exposing the weaknesses in the business model used to define corruption and resource the massive yet incompetent anti-corruption effort. The paper then aims to follow this critique by considering an alternative way of dealing with the awesome dimensions of African corruption.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper utilises in-depth secondary source analysis, applying critical theory.

Findings – Corruption's main interpretive framework, neo-liberalism, is exposed as dominating, business-centric and non-utilitarian. A new paradigm with a strong ethnographic texture is presented.

Originality/value – The paper for the first time co-analyses two contending paradigms for the construction of African corruption in the context of the global economic crisis.

Keywords Corruption, Africa, Economics, Globalization, Culture, Political philosophy, Ethnography

Paper type Conceptual paper

> Economics is a powerful tool for the analysis of corruption. Cultural differences and morality provide nuance and subtlety, but an economic approach is fundamental to understanding where corrupt incentives are the greatest and have the biggest impact (Susan Rose-Ackerman, 1999).

> [Ethnographical] analysis has to be carefully situated in the social relations within which corruption is talked about and defined. This means gaining an understanding of how different people are differently positioned to claim that a particular practice is corrupt or indeed to partake in corrupt activities. Relations of class and gender may be particularly relevant (Elizabeth Harrison, 2006).

The polarised viewpoints expressed in these statements suggest a robust paradigmatic conflict between two approaches for the conceptual control of "corruption"[1]. This is, unfortunately, not the case. These sense-making engagements are conducted in terms of huge power and legitimacy asymmetries. The first statement, by one of the leading economic scholar-warriors, is representational of a quantitatively superior arsenal of literature on corruption. This literature has two preoccupations:

This paper was presented at the 6th International Critical Management Studies Conference, Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, 13-15 July 2009. The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance and guidance of the editors and reviewers.

critical perspectives on international business
Vol. 5 No. 4, 2009
pp. 263-284

1742-2043
DOI 10.1108/17422040911003024

(1) to chart "corruption"'s negative impacts on a variety of economic indicators such as government expenditures, total investment, capital flows, foreign direct investment, international trade, foreign aid and GDP *per capita* (Lambsdorff, 1999; Welsch, 2008); and
(2) to expose corruption as big business, thereupon underwriting (seriously non-performing) anti-corruption initiatives into Sub-Saharan Africa (De Maria, 2008a).

The constant and prodigious outpourings in this area from academic, political and media sources appears apprehensively riveted to the oft-quoted (but unconfirmed) World Bank and OECD figures that bribery has become a $US1 trillion industry worldwide (World Bank, 2009), that corruption adds more than 10 per cent to the total cost of doing global business and 25 per cent to the cost of procurement contracts in developing countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008). This literature is volume-produced, lazily reproduced and greedily consumed by corruption-relevant international agencies such as the World Bank, the IMF, Transparency International, government foreign aid departments and (disappointingly) large components of academia (Murungi, 2004; De Maria, 2008b). It is indeed victor scholarship in a paradigmatic war where the policy and political stakes are high – to win the right to construct a meaning of corruption.

The second statement quoted at the top of the paper, by a British anthropologist, represents a minority scholarship that is struggling to secure a presence in the current worldwide debate about corruption. This scholarship moves the focus from business as "corruption's" victim to the human casualties of corruption. This humanistic orientation travels on a number of minor by-roads: development economics, welfare economics and the lesser known ethnography of corruption. A typical output from this marginalised scholarship is Welsch's (2008) recent finding that the direct negative impacts of corruption on subjective well being are much larger than the indirect negative impacts of corruption on the economy "due to the time and effort required to cope with corrupt behavior, or psychological costs associated with a general climate of unlawfulness" (p. 1846).

The purpose of this paper is not to naively seek to correct the paradigmatic balance. Rather, the paper analyses the powerful economic approach to African corruption and introduces the alternative ethnographic paradigm, with some reflections as to why it has, so far, failed to get traction in academic, but more particularly, policy circles. Harrison (2006), quoting Transparency International figures, says that only 2 per cent of all corruption research comes from an ethnographic framework (p. 16).

The paper is in two broad parts. The first part deals with the rise, and, as a result of the global economic crisis, the possible fall of the dominant economic approach to corruption. The second part maps what Harrison has labelled a new ethnography of corruption (p. 20). Could this be the way of the future? A way whereby Africa retakes management control over its own corruption? With this question we are at the edge of the paper.

The triumph of space over inclination requires that I treat both paradigms ahistorically. Thus I will avoid entanglements with economics's and ethnography's colonial past, except to say that both approaches, in their nineteenth- and twentieth-century incarnations, offered strong epistemological justifications for white colonisation. I will also avoid considerations (important as they are) of internal dissensions within each approach, noting that there is a literature on this matter, both in economics (Frey *et al.*, 1984; Kamarck, 2002; Leyshon *et al.*, 2003) and ethnography (Rabinow, 1988; Marcus, 1998, 2008). If that is not enough, I will narrow the presentation of the very broad economic approach down to a consideration of its predatory alter ego: neo-liberalism.

Neo-liberalism behind the mask

From the late 1970s neo-liberalism quickly achieved a transnational consensus in mature capitalist economies jaded by soaring welfare budgets. There appeared a "better way" of conducting social and economic arrangements than through doctrinaire socialisms or the softer Keynesian equivalents in the post-war mixed economies. The boom years that followed chorused new triumphal mantras: free, not regulated markets; individual, not social responsibility; and small, not big governments. Government and business self-conceptions and roles were fundamentally altered. Governments, now with an eye to the bottom line, started to act like businesses. At the same time, businesses taking over government responsibilities through widespread outsourcing and privatisations of essential and non-essential services, started to act like governments. The power of this new world paradigm was unmatched. It was carried into every conceivable policy, including the neo-liberal approach to corruption. Ethnography could not offer an alternative vision. The reasons for the power of the neo-liberal approach to corruption are the same reasons why the ethnographic approach is weak.

In a recent helpful analysis, Mudge (2008) has portrayed neo-liberalism as possessing three "faces":

(1) intellectual;

(2) bureaucratic; and

(3) political.

Neo-liberalism's intellectual face is distinguished by its Anglo-American anchored transnationality, its historical gestation within the institutions of capitalism, and an unadulterated emphasis on the disembodied market as the source and arbiter of human freedom. Additionally, neo-liberalism achieved ascendancy through institutionalisation in the central mechanisms of capitalism (banks, think tanks, universities). Here is the key to the strength of neo-liberalist explanation of corruption. This coveted prize eluded ethnography. It was marginalised as a scholarly way of understanding human society, not a way of practically managing it.

Neo-liberalism's bureaucratic face is expressed in anti-state policies such as privatisation and its political face is a new market-centric "politics" which entails a huge reductionist attack on Second World War interventionism.

Mudge (2008) brings these strands together in a single definition:

> ... neo-liberalism is an ideological system that holds the market sacred, born within the "human" or social sciences and defined in a network of Anglo-American-centric knowledge producers, expressed in different ways within the institutions of the post-war nation state and their political fields (p. 706).

The difficulty with this definition is the light touch it makes on the impacts of neo-liberalism on (developing world) state power. There is abundant evidence how, in being forced to take the neo-liberal medicine, African states have been structurally weakened, some perhaps irredeemably so (Mamdani, 1996; Villalón and Huxtable, 1998; Herbst, 2000; Englebert, 2000; Akyüz and Gore, 2001; Muiu, 2008; Engelbert and Tull, 2008). This has big implications for an African future. Can fresh rivers of government responsibility now ever run across the desiccated African state? If neo-liberalism loses its ideological grip as a result of its implication in the global economic crisis, perhaps there is a real chance for the emergence of genuine African sovereignties. The question that hovers over the paper is how will African states rebuild, and importantly, take control back over the management of their indigenous forms of corruption?

There is another difficulty with Mudge's definition. While historical, it *appears* neutral. Language is everything in the institutionalisation of shared definitions of reality (Phillips *et al.*, 2004). Notwithstanding his important analysis, Mudge has not picked up on the fact that we are burdened with a grossly dishonest lexical tradition when it comes to the use of the title "neo-liberalism". Behind the Orwellian syntax there is only a morsel of social and environmental responsibility in neo-liberalism. Undressed, it is a veneration of unfettered greed, exploitation and accumulation. Neo-liberalism is another name for regulation-free economic activity and consumer capitalism (Haque, 1999, 2008). There is nothing "new" here. From an ideological point of view neo-liberalism is deeply retrocessive. It wistfully orients to its golden age when eighteenth-century capitalism had a brief free moment before modern capitalist societies realised that this system of commerce had deep sociopathic tendencies and needed to be put on strong regulatory leashes.

Neo-liberalism's uncertain future

Any critical analysis of neo-liberalism now has to be extremely circumspect about neo-liberalism's future. While the consensus of expert opinion is that the neo-liberal way of doing business is being mightily reshaped by the current global economic crisis, there is no firm indication yet as to how that will occur. Delicious questions hang provocatively, waiting to be picked. Are we facing the end of neo-liberalism and the Washington Consensus? Is a Keynesian revival likely? Will the neo-liberal orthodoxies of Hayek (1986), Friedman (1962) and Nozick (1974) be abandoned? Will a new global economic consensus emerge? Will the IMF and the World Bank seek to rectify the state infrastructure damage they perpetrated on Africa through aid conditionality and embargoes on African governments adopting counter-cyclic measures (Ocampo, 2009)? Or, as White (2009) recently pondered, will neo-liberalism win through again by default? Obviously the answers to these questions are pending and the analysis in this paper cannot but circulate around the current situation. However we can say with some confidence that neo-liberalism's dominance in the conception of corruption will now be up for serious reconsideration.

Africa and the global economic crisis

The current global economic crisis, viewed here as a failure of neo-liberalism (Rudd, 2009: Blackman, 2009), will, despite early reports, flood into Africa. As Lovering (2009) put it recently:

> Global unemployment will rise this year by perhaps 50 million, according to the ILO. And this is not even half the story. The recession is predicted to tip 200 million people into extreme poverty [. . .] Although it began with the most affluent and parasitic denizens of the heartland of Western capitalism, the heaviest burdens are falling on those on the geographic and social margins (p. 3).

According to the head of the African Development Bank, the global economic crisis is already ravaging African economies through the collapse in world commodity prices and the evaporation of foreign investment (Kaberuka, 2009). The crisis also appears to have pushed the already stalled Doha Development Round further into the diplomatic background. Doha had the task of seeking a worldwide liberalisation in trade rules so that countries such as those in Africa could have long sought entry to markets around the world. Akukwe (2009) says that African access to the lucrative markets of North America and Europe will be further stalled and Africa will remain outside, looking in (Akukwe, 2009).

The Group of Twenty (G20) leaders meeting in April 2009 in London ended with significant pronouncements on how to end the ongoing global economic downturn. By the end of 2010, at least $US5 trillion will be spent on trying to grow the global economy, create millions of jobs and raise global economic output by 4 percent (Akukwe, 2009). In the G20 agreement, Sub-Sahara Africa was mentioned only once (Akukwe, 2009)[2]. The G20 agreement did not mention specific issues that African governments confront on a grand scale: abject poverty, unchecked communicable diseases, collapse of global prices on Africa's largely based unprocessed raw material exports and limited access to the rich markets of the West. Nor, we can add, African corruption, which is the source of much official Western angst.

Footnoted at the G20 meeting, shelved at Doha, exposed to the global economic crisis, all this on top of the heavy reality that Africa is the poorest region of the world, with average *per capita* income lower than it was 30 years ago (Engelbert and Tull, 2008). From the point of view of the main themes being pursued in this paper, the "Africa-going-backwards" thesis is real and dense with change possibilities for the West-led "war" on African corruption. Foreign aid (estimated at $US1 trillion over the last 60 years), already under heavy attack, as evidenced by the way Dambiso Moyo's recent book *Dead Aid* (Moyo, 2009) has been popularly received, could mean a significant withdrawal of anti-corruption resources from Africa[3]. G8 nations have already reneged, or failed to commit to the levels of aid promised with great fanfare at the Bono- and Geldof-serenaded G8 summit at Gleneagles in 2005[4]. This has meant that African countries are now more robustly courting international finance in anticipation of no growth in their aid budgets. This will not necessarily be a bad thing. It may, in fact pave the way (albeit by default) for paradigm growth in the ethnography of corruption. This is all in the future. This paper picks up the story in the pre-crisis era when neo-liberalism was the unchallenged *Zeitgeist*.

The view from the neo-liberal window

Until the start of the global economic crisis in 2007, neo-liberalism had been on a worldwide resurgent trajectory for over 30 years (Mudge, 2008, p. 705). Nothing seemed immune from this new orthodoxy of greed and unregulated entrepreneurialism (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Alvarez *et al.*, 1998). It effectively dispersed itself through deregulation, privatisation, outsourcing and corporatisation (Levi-Faor, 2005), and burrowed deep into the central players in the bungled international crusade against corruption such as first-world aid paradigms (Cooke, 2004), the World Bank (Storey, 2000; Polzer, 2001), the International Monetary Fund (Parson, 2002; Cizre and Yeldan, 2005; Chwieroth, 2007), the European Union (Crawford, 2005) and the World Trade Organisation (Ocampo, 2009).

Talking about the impact of neo-liberalism on Africa, the black scholar Thiong'o (2005) has this to say:

> Fundamentalism, secular or religious, is a belief [. . .] that there is only one way of organising reality – it demands that all conform to that idea or else be excommunicated from the global temple of the true believer [. . .] The economic panacea dished out to all who seek loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund has the same identical demand – privatise or perish [and] leave everything to the tender mercies of the market (p. 155).

By the 1980s a new accord had emerged amongst economists that replaced the previous post-war Keynesian consensus. Economists now believed that free capital migrations in and out of countries were a good thing (Chwieroth, 2007; James, 1996). A recent report by the IMF on the financial outlook for Sub-Saharan Africa urged African governments to "unleash the private sector" if they are going to make any proper social and economic progress (International Monetary Fund, 2007, p. 21). The re-identification of Africa as a cheap extraction site has made Africa something like the Californian Gold Rush of 1848-1855. The IMF recently called Sub-Saharan Africa a new "frontier" for international capital. It noted, with satisfaction, the growing interest of international investors in Africa, driven in part by Sub-Saharan Africa experiencing what it says is the highest growth and lowest inflation in 30 years[5]. In short summary here, neo-liberalism has been the economic and political orthodoxy for much of Africa. What accounts for its rapid ascendancy?

Neo-liberalism was ready when the rich country world started to globalise. Hardly an intellectual *tour d'force*; rather, reheated Cold War Anglo-American capitalist "certainties" about the rightness of government-free commerce (and the wrongness of the "failed" socialist project) that could be quickly up-drafted to meet the new economic and political realities that, in Mudge's (2008) words, "lay beyond the boundaries of the nation state" (p. 708). The ascendancy also benefited from new geo-political realities such as the collapse of the USSR and the rise of a capitalist China.

Credit for its ascendancy is also attributed to cashed-up Anglo-American free-market think tanks (Smith, 1993) and right wing political elites (Mudge, 2008). There is a string of studies causally connecting neo-liberal cultures in eminent economic schools in America (e.g. Chicago, Harvard, Berkeley, Stanford) to the beliefs of doctoral students (Hansen, 1991; Valdes, 1995; Barber, 1996; Campbell, 2001). There is also Helleiner's (1994) work on the connection between the rise of neo-liberalism and global finance and subsequent developments in this field by Chwieroth (2003, 2007), who investigated why market economies have liberalized controls on international capital flows. Chwieroth explains this in terms of a neo-liberal policy consensus in the international financial system that drove the movement towards rapid market liberalization. A key finding was how neo-liberal norms emerged initially from a network of knowledge-based professionals who after acquiring power in key international and national financial institutions diffused neo-liberal norms by teaching and persuading decision makers in emerging markets to adopt them (Chwieroth, 2003).

The view from the ethnographer's window

This part tries to avoid the silo mindset and offers a co-consideration of ethnography and post-colonialism, as they have a lot in common, epistemologically speaking. Both see cultural wisdom in the experiences of the "other". They diverge methodologically in how they collect and interpret this material. The ethnographic project is quintessentially an empirical one in the true (non-scientific) sense of the word; to gain knowledge through the senses. Ethnography lays claim to a strong story-telling and documentary tradition as practitioners go out and live amongst their research subjects (Van Maanen, 2006).

This immersive fieldwork is the stock and trade of ethnographers as they observe people going about the daily rituals of life. If this life is being led against a backdrop of corruption then the ethnographer should seek to capture the many ways corruption is variously accommodated, opposed, rejected or integrated into the daily rituals of African survival. The ethnographer can take us into the Mali mud house to witness the human impact of corruption. We see it in the sick child deprived of medicines by local health bureaucrats who have sold the needed drugs on the black market.

The post-colonial scholar, outside the mud house, so to speak, weaves these stories into conclusions of dispossession, ethnic violence and poverty that are tracked back to the enduring legacy of colonialism. Post colonialism confidently displays a conviction-based curiosity about the oppressive consequences of deep Western footprints across the colonised world[6]. Through postcolonial eyes one sees continuities in the engagements between Africa and the West. As Westwood and Jack (2007) say:

> There is no one point at which colonialism formally ceases [. . .] the colonial condition and its formal structures of domination did not suddenly disappear after the end of formal direct-rule. The effects of colonialism continue to reverberate in profound cultural and material ways, *particularly when colonialism is understood as the contemporary global system of hegemonic economic power under late capitalism* (pp. 246-7; emphasis added).

History matters, in other words, when we are unravelling complex constructs such as corruption. History counts in at least two important ways. First it is the template we can overlay on current issues for deeper meaning. For example Kenya, long regarded as one of Africa's more stable countries, erupted into violence in February 2008. Over 900 people were killed and more than a quarter of a million people displaced (Lewis, 2008). The popular interpretation of the fighting is that it is a political conflict caused by President Mwai Kibaki's disputed 27 December 2007 re-election. But it is more than a contemporary political squabble[7].

There is more to it. The dispute has blown the lid off decades-old divisions between tribal groupings over land, wealth and power, dating from the muddled interventions of the British during the colonial period. According to one commentator, the epicentre of the clashes is the agriculturally rich Rift Valley region; the most settled region of Kenya. It is also in the Rift Valley where communities like the Masai, the Pokot and the Nandi have unresolved grievances over land ownership centred on historical injustices traceable to colonial occupation (Ong'wen, 2008). Ong'wen says that it was in the Rift Valley where British settlers alienated huge tracts of land from indigenous Kenyans (paying a mere ten cents per acre to the crown, not to the owners). It was in the Rift Valley where the Masai community was duped into signing a 100-year agreement with the British in 1904 and denied a hearing by Kibaki's government in 2004 when the agreement had elapsed.

History is also crucial because it tracks pathways of oppression and interference from the present back into the past. For example we can plot an unbroken path from the Berlin Conference of 1884, the subsequent partition of British-controlled Africa and the recent remarks by the new head of the World Bank, Robert Zoellick. The Berlin Conference was cartography *sans* ethics. Africa was simply divided between the main powers of Europe. By 1902, 90 per cent of all the land that makes up Africa was under European control. The British based their interests in Nigeria, Kenya and Tanganyika (now the United Republic of Tanzania). Their method of colonial administration required dramatic reconfigurations of these places. In Nigeria three large ethnic divisions were forcibly created from 250 separate ethnic groups that were in existence at the time of the British invasion (Subrahmanyam, 2006). That was then.

The erratic geo-political map of Africa was recently re-drawn by the new president of the World Bank:

> I roughly group the countries into three categories, each requiring a different approach: (i) countries moving toward sustained growth at higher levels; (ii) those that are growing but based heavily on natural resource development; and (iii) countries in fragile or post-conflict situations (Zoellick, 2008).

The point is that by making forceful strokes across the map of Africa, Zoellick is once again laying bare a colonially seized historical prerogative for the West to continue interfering in Africa for whatever purpose. Nestling within the powerful folds of this prerogative is the neo-liberal approach to corruption.

The neo-liberal approach to "corruption": theory or theology?

On 25 January 2008 Robert Zoellick began his first official visit to Africa as President of the World Bank Group. According to the official media report of the trip, Zoellick travelled to Mauritania, Liberia, Ethiopia, and Mozambique. In Mauritania he met with the private sector and discussed the Bank's role in supporting Mauritania's growth agenda. In Liberia Zoellick participated in a roundtable with Finance Ministers from Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Togo. His itinerary also had him addressing the 10th Ordinary Assembly of the African Union as the first World Bank President to speak at a Summit of African heads of state and governments (World Bank, 2008).

As this powerful man, from the most powerful Western organisation in Africa, mixed with the African leadership, he would have reproduced, no doubt with great diplomatic subtlety, a set of engagements Africans are well used to. They have seen it all before: explorer, missionary, soldier, trader, administrator, and now the President of the World Bank. The elements of the engagement remain fixed: a power asymmetry, a non-negotiable and external originating *Weltanschauung,* a doctrine of some kind codifying the power vision (bibles, surveys, rule books, legal enactments, contracts), and a flourish of other-abiding rhetoric about reducing corruption, poverty and disease, and (more recently), spreading democracy. Zoellick's engagements would have met these factors. He would have repeated for the African leadership the neo-liberal mantra: fiscal rectitude, privatisation, market-determined exchange rates, low-profile business regulation, high-profile public order, free trade, minimum transnational capital controls, reduced public service and the control of unions (Rodrik, 1996; Harvey, 2005; Cohen and Centeno, 2006).

If one was forced to name a start date for the neo-liberal ascendancy in the African corruption debate, it would have to be October 1996. That was when the then World Bank president, James Wolfensohn, and the IMF managing director, Michael Camdessus, announced that from henceforth they would use their respective donor leverages with African countries to stamp out corruption (Op de Beke, 2000). This announcement signalled the start of an anti-corruption donor stampede into Africa. The year 2007 was a record year for World Bank outlays to Africa, with $US7.3 billion committed (World Bank, 2008)[8].

A scan of the publications from transnational bodies justifying their new African anti-corruption commitments indicates a strong preference for resource material that makes direct connections between corruption and national and international economic systems. It appears that the alleged injury corruption can do to business (particularly the Western transnational variety) is now the dominant discourse in anti-corruption policy and academic circles. Studies are in abundance now that purport to inversely connect corruption to economic performance (Keefer and Knack, 1995; Mauro, 1995; Campos *et al.*, 1999; Hope, 2000; Abed and Gupta, 2002). Corruption is seen to draw talent away from entrepreneurship and innovation (Murphy *et al.*, 1991), foster low-quality infrastructure (Tanzi and Davoodi, 1997), facilitate the "black" economy (Cule and Fulton, 2005; Jay and Thum, 2005); enforce short-term planning (Rose-Ackerman, 2002), institutionalise short-term contracting (Uhlenbruck *et al.*, 2006); increase borrowing costs for governments and businesses in emerging economies (Ciocchini *et al.*, 2003), retard business growth (Mendez and Sepulveda, 2006; Fisman and Svensson, 2007; Yeh and Vaughn, 2007; Kimuyu, 2007; Okpara and Wynn, 2007), foster allocative inefficiencies (Enderwick, 2005), lower the efficiency of production (Rose-Ackerman, 2002), lower the levels of investment (Mauro, 1995; Wei, 1997), limit the number of competitive bidders (Rose-Ackerman, 2002), discourage structural adjustment (Enderwick, 2005) and facilitate low regulatory climates (Manzetti and Blake, 1996).

Private-sector finance (excluding the threatening Chinese yuan) has been seen by the IMF as the key to sustainable growth in Africa (Wakeman-Linn and Nagy, 2008). This new capital rush to Africa has been serviced by a very active scholarship supportive of the values of neo-liberalism. It has achieved great utilitarian value for trans-nationalising capital by empirically tracing out the local economic conditions required to maximise Western business return in Africa. One of these conditions, a "corrupt" free *local* eco-political climate, I would argue has been elevated in the scholarship to the condition *par excellence* for capital to succeed in Africa. Thus in a very short period of time, economic scholarship has raised corruption above other traditional curses of capitalism (inflation, low unemployment, government-business transaction costs) as the curse *par excellence*. This scholarship now has open entry into boardrooms and trading houses in all the great capitals of the West.

There is a clear lack of evidence from any dispassionate and credible source that African corruption is being reduced by the neo-liberal crusade to make the world safe for capital. The way corruption is measured and managed is now the topic of critical examination. A recent deconstruction of the most common measure of corruption, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, found that the index was highly invalid, only measuring business confidence (De Maria, 2008c). Similarly, new studies on African anti-corruption agencies (most of which are Western facsimiles) report failure (Meagher, 2004, 2005; Michael, 2004; Doig *et al.*, 2007; De Maria, 2008a). In that context can we imagine a different way of understanding African corruption that moves the focus from the structural needs of inbound entrepreneurial capital to one that revolves around history and culture? If this is possible we are on our way to designing a subversive scholarship that will tilt at the giant windmill of neo-liberalism and offer more options to attack African corruption.

In summary, what are the objections to a neo-liberal conception of corruption? Three come to mind. First is a bogus ahistoricity whereby "corrupt" acts are explained free of history as the behaviours of public actors misusing discretionary state powers for private gain. Second, and connected to the first objection, is a naïve universalism that sees corruption as a standard pattern manifesting itself everywhere at every time. Third there is condoned a ruptural understanding of public and private. There is the public sphere on one hand which hosts corruption and there is the private sphere on the other, made up of socially-disconnected self-maximising entrepreneurs who simply cannot get on because of the burden and distraction of corruption by other people (Bedirhanoglu, 2007). The ethnography of corruption offers a suitably polarised alternative.

Towards an ethnography of corruption

In this, the final section of the paper, I explore how ethnographic constructs of corruption are arrived at. I do this through the works of Smith and Ekeh. Finally I consider the practical shape of business when it operates with ethnographic sensitivities.

Using data on the Igbos of Southeast Nigeria, Smith (2001) explored the social reproduction of corruption. In this quest Smith never wandered far from the lived experiences of people. In his understanding, networks of kin, community, and interpersonal association embed resource imbalances. Someone has a relative who is a local politician with access to drought relief; most do not. Someone else has a spare plough plot; most do not. Someone else can facilitate a borderline admission to a university; most cannot. Patronage is the solution to the problem of local resource imbalance. When these are effected they produce long-lasting moral obligations and affective attachments – alliances, in other words.

When these patronages work outside the given law or custom they are labelled "corrupt" acts. Smith (2001) rejects this conclusion. He simply sees the Igbo people trying to survive in one of the poorest countries on Earth by navigating Nigeria's clientelistic political economy. In fact he sees them having a vested personal and family interest in *reproducing* corruption. This sort of reasoning allows him to use the phrase "the social and moral fabric of corruption", which, we have to recognise, would be intolerable to proponents of the economic approach. Smith says that "what critics might gloss as 'corruption' can look like moral behaviour from a local perspectives" (p. 345).

To (justifiably) complicate matters further Smith says he detected a profound moral ambivalence in the Igbo. On one hand they energetically participated in remedying resource imbalances through reciprocal behaviour that outsiders would rule as "corrupt". On the other hand "they condemned the very practices in which they participate and lament the effects of a system they are obliged to reproduce" (Smith, 2001, p. 346).

Every person in the 13 Igbo villages that Smith researched in Ubakala was expected to assist members of his or her patrilineage (*umunna*), matrilineage (*umunne*), and a host of other connections created by ties of residence and association (p. 351). However, these give-and-take transactions are governed by subtle conventions that would escape all Westerners bar those with the eye of the insider. Smith's education example shows how the indigenous line is drawn between corruption and legality.

Nneka scored well on her secondary schools admission test but not good enough to guarantee entry to the school desired by her parents. Nnek'a mother found out that her sister had a friend in the Federal Ministry of Education in Lagos. The friend said she would try and get Nneka admitted to the favoured school by having her name on the Minister's discretionary list. The parents had to pay the women a considerable sum for this. By now the Western eye has identified a "corrupt" act. But is it so?

Not according to Smith. Even though the payment was an essential part of the process, he maintains from the ethnographic evidence that it was not a bribe. The thing that made inclusion on the discretionary list possible was not the money but the *connection*. As Smith explains:

> The money actually represented a social distance in the connection. The woman in the ministry almost surely would have refused any [payment] to help her own sister's daughter. A complete stranger offering money to get on the "Minister's list" would likely have been rejected outright [. . .] To accept money from a stranger to facilitate admission of a child who was not qualified based on her exam result is wrong: the rules of the state apply in such an impersonal case. To help your relation get admission when her scores were below the cut-off is expected and morally justified: the [moral] rules of kinship, community and reciprocity apply when the stakes are personal/communal (p. 353).

Smith's findings have been corroborated outside Africa (Ruud, 2000; Gupta, 2005). Future developments of his analysis will have to take into account the interaction between social and familial obligations and the raw facts of power imbalances.

Finally the work of Ekeh (1975) needs to be considered, for his is another seminal effort to detach our gaze from the narrow economised Western precepts of corruption (Osaghae, 2006). This construction depends on a polarisation between *public* and *private*. Indeed, without this polarisation we would not have the most popular definition of corruption in the world: "the abuse of public office for private gain".

Ekeh (1975) says that this public-private duality does not transfer easily to Africa. There *is* a private realm but he insists that it is differentially associated with two public moral universes:

(1) the primordial public; and
(2) the civic public.

The former (to do with kinship) operates on the same moral imperatives as the private realm. The latter is associated with the colonial administration and based on the civil structures such as military and the police. It has become identified with popular politics in the African post-colony. Its major characteristic is that it has *no* moral linkages with the private moral realm. In fact, Ekeh goes as far as saying that the *civic public* is amoral. Thus we have political actors operating in two realms:

(1) a moral-based primordial realm; and
(2) a moral-free (or moral-muted) civic realm.

Life in the primordial public (e.g. life in post-colonial tribal-familial clusters) is a life full of obligations to the larger group and concern for its welfare and continuity. The overlap with Smith here is clear. The group, or culture, or history is transcendent. The group member is merely an ingredient in its value or a moment in its continuity. In return for looking out for the group, the member receives identity, psychological comfort. These are non-transactional as they are in the West. In other words the obligations to the primordial public are not offered in exchange for rights.

Ekeh says that while many Africans bend over backwards to benefit and sustain their primordial public, they seek to gain from their involvement in the civic public:

> . . . the individual's relationship with the civic public is measured in material terms [. . .] While the individual seeks to gain from the civic public, there is no moral urge on him to give back to the civic public in return for his benefits [. . .] Duties [. . .] are de-emphasised while rights are squeezed out of the civic public with the amorality of the artful dodger (p. 107).

For Ekeh, the unwritten law is that it is legitimate to rob the civic public as long as the purpose is to strengthen the primordial public. Practices defined in law as "fraud" and "embezzlement" are sanctioned (or at the very least, tolerated) as long as the target is the government, not organic clusters such as extended families, neighbourhood, etc.

Ekeh traces this necessary anti-state sentiment to the colonial period and the ensuing struggles for independence across the African continent. These struggles entailed sabotage of colonial administration through absenteeism, pilfering, strikes, tax evasion and the like. For Ekeh, these subversive activities did not stop at independence. They carried over to post-colonial rule. The dialectical tussle between the two publics is for Ekeh the most significant shaper of African politics today.

Ekeh's theory of the two publics has been hailed by Osaghae (2006) as perhaps the most useful perspective on the post-colonial structure of African civil society. He is referring to Ekeh's questions about why the African state is weak, prone to kleptocratic control and deeply structured by ethnic forces. Ekeh has a one word answer – colonialism.

The pioneering works reviewed here reinforce the position that there is a second way of comprehending wrongdoing. This way – what I have been calling an ethnography of corruption – would focus on the human, not the economic costs. How would it proceed? I see the project developing on two levels: deconstruction and construction. First, the ethnography would have an insurgent agenda. It would develop deconstructions of various aspects of the dominant neo-liberal approach. This means engaging critically with the anti-corruption agenda (including World Bank and IMF forced privatisations) and the dominant corruption discourse. De Maria's recent deconstruction of the Corruption Perceptions Index used by Transparency International, Polzer's deconstruction of the World Bank and Sampson's critique of global moralising by Transparency International are cases in point (De Maria, 2008b; Polzer, 2001; Sampson, 2005).

The ethnography would apply its traditional cultural profiling methodologies to the construction of new knowledge of the experiences of people living with corruption. For in this position corruption is a social act whose meaning can only be accessed via the analyses of social relationships (Harrison, 2006). So in this emergent scholarship we look for the insights that sit at crucial intersection points, such as the crossovers between:

- corruption and poverty;
- corruption and predatory government;
- corruption and family welfare; and
- corruption and access to mal-distributed services.

Finally, in the form of a brief postscript, note is made of the concept of *ubuntu*. This note will link a culturally sensitive approach to corruption with a culturally sensitive approach to business. Found widely spread throughout Central, Southern and Eastern Africa, *ubuntu* means that parties to transactions, specifically in this paper, commercial exchanges, engage in ways that build on solidarity, relationship building and communal caring (Newenham-Khahindi, 2009). South African management practices have been identified in the literature as being imbued with *ubuntu* principles (Horwitz, 2000). The point is that culture and history shape business practice as much as the profit imperative. These are the same forces that should be allowed free space to shape the construction of African corruption.

Conclusion

The paper has targeted the reigning construction of corruption. This construction simplistically (and cynically) sees corruption predominantly as a viral condition for business. Targeting this dominant paradigm is not an easy task. The voluminous studies of corruption's impedimenta to profit making show all the signs of end of Cold War victor scholarship. The one-world *market,* deified in the scholarship, is the gold standard against which culture must seek accommodation. Like all victor scholarships, however, it has cavernous blind spots in need of exposure – notably the tendency to only "see" corruption in African business partners, African public administration and African governments. "Corrupt" practices brought into Africa by Western companies (e.g. Acres International[9], Elf[10], Anglo-Leasing[11], British banks[12]) are never given the same attention (Leigh and Pallister, 2005).

From this critique the paper advances an ethnography of corruption, a minority discourse that seeks history- and culture-bound appreciations of patterns of wrongdoing. It is sketched as a two-level epistemological project:

(1) deconstructions of dominant discourses of corruption; and

(2) reconstructions of people's stories about their life and entrapment in material realities such as poverty that too often are mis-defined as *sequelae* of corruption.

In a practical sense, what does an ethnographical approach to corruption look like? NGOs and field workers utilising this approach would offer more people-centered options for local communities struggling under the hardship of wrongdoing that they themselves have been allowed to judge as "corrupt". In other words, in this ethnographic approach the action avenues run upwards to power. This is opposite to what happens practically in the economic approach. There, so-called anti-corruption initiatives stream down from power elites to powerless actors in local communities for projects invariably associated with de-risking the placement of entrepreneurial capital.

The overriding focus for the ethnographer of corruption is to resource poor people to fight against the abuse of power and responsibility that they have collectively and subjectively comprehended as acts of corruption. Goetz (2002) has documented a range of grassroots anti-corruption initiatives in India that illustrate the ethnographic approach:

> [This includes] a workers' and peasants' union in rural Rajasthan protesting at officials pocketing part of workers' wages on employment-generation schemes, small groups of women slum-dwellers in Mumbai fighting against the diversion of subsidised food for the poor to the open market, and lower-caste and women's groups in Goa and Kerala struggling to ensure that development resources earmarked for their use were not withheld by officials (p. 13).

Finally, some comments needs to be made about what will shape the fortunes of an ethnography of corruption. It should be noted that any expansion in the visibility and utility of this alternative is dialectically connected to the future shape of international business partnerships between Africa and the rest of the world. The dominant economic approach to corruption has, up until now, fitted so perfectly with the purposes of international business. Are new realignments possible as capitalist economies try to struggle free of the global economic crisis and in so doing possibly produce a new set of tensions between Africa and those who would do business with it?

Any rewriting of the biased rules of commercial engagement between Africa and Western capitalist powers is bound to impact on the contested construction of corruption. International business will emerge from the global economic crisis with its reputation either enhanced or further damaged. It may pick up its commercial engagements with Africa as if no crisis occurred. Or it may increasingly be viewed in pariah terms and life made difficult for this level of commerce. If African states take a harder line with international business this may lead to a reduction in the scale of international commerciality or at least an increase in its regulation. Developing more local and regional economic zones will facilitate ethnographic analyses of corruption as it is at these smaller scales that the ethnographic analysis works best.

We can contemplate another scenario whereby the future unfolds two international business domains in Africa – one between America and member states of the European Union and the other with China and India. Will the first domain enclave the economic approach to corruption and make it very difficult for an ethnography of corruption to emerge? China and India, with very different constructs of corruption, may allow room for the ethnographic interpretation to grow simply because attaching Western-type anti-corruption conditionalities to economic partnerships is irrelevant to accessing cheap raw materials and dumping cheap manufactured goods.

In essence the ethnography of corruption replaces external scripts portraying corruption as a trans-cultural threat to entrepreneurial capital with local scripts that convey the domestic essence of a life made more burdensome by the abuse of power and responsibility. The question is, can an institutionally unaffiliated ethnographic approach compete with – indeed supplant – the dominant economic view of corruption that enjoys cross-institutional patronage from the most powerful operators in the anti-corruption sector?

Notes

1. In this paper the word "corruption" should be read throughout as in inverted commas, to indicate that its meaning remains problematic.
2. The solitary mention was in relation to the pledge to keep faith with earlier pledges on the Millennium Development Goals, Overseas Development Assistance, debt relief and the Gleneagles G8 conference.

3. Between 2003 and 2007 Germany, UK, Norway, and The Netherlands together funded 157 anti-"corruption" projects in Sub-Saharan Africa, at the cost of about $US928million. This figure is a general indicator. It comes from the Utstein Anti-Corruption Resource Centre database. Euro values have been converted to US dollar values at the exchange rate for 22 January 2008. The following warning appears on the Utstein Anti-Corruption Resource Centre: "The database is not regularly updated by all U4 partner agencies and is therefore not a comprehensive database of these agencies' projects". In fiscal years 2001-2002 (the latest figures) US funding for anti-corruption projects in Sub-Saharan Africa averaged about $US33 million per year (US General Accounting Office, 2004, p. 15). It is anticipated that this level of funding will rise dramatically as a result of the recently initiated US Millennium Challenge Account. Up to 2000 the World Bank had funded 350 specific anti-corruption programs to 95 donor countries, many of which are in Africa (Wolfensohn, 2000).

4. G8 is an international forum of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the UK and the USA. Together, these countries represent about 65 per cent of the world economy. If aid to the Sub-Saharan region is to meet its Gleneagles-struck target of $US50billion by 2010, G8 donors must increase their disbursements to the region by more then 15 per cent per year. However pre-global economic crisis IMF projections through to 2010 indicate that aid will only rise by 8 per cent per year (International Monetary Fund, 2007, Box 1.3).

5. The IMF says that growth in Sub-Saharan Africa should reach 6.75 per cent in 2008, up from 5.5 per cent in 2006. Global growth in 2008 is predicted to be 4.75 per cent. Inflation should average 7.5 per cent in 2007 and fall to 6.75 per cent in 2008 (International Monetary Fund, 2007, p. 1). At present this growth is predominantly from oil exports from countries such as Nigeria (International Monetary Fund, 2007, Table 1.1). These predictions are now void because of the global economic crisis.

6. The postcolonial critique is found in an ever-expanding range of areas: race relations (Bruyneel, 2007; Hoxie, 2008), literature (Thiong'o, 1986; Hogan, 2000; Ashcroft *et al.*, 2002), culture (Said, 2003; Bhabha, 2004), feminism (Narayan, 1997, international business (Westwood, 2006; Westwood and Jack, 2007), international relations (Paolini, 1999; Jahn, 2000; Chowdhry and Nair, 2002), development studies (Kapoor, 2008), organisations (Prasad, 2003; Panoho and Stablein, 2005; Frenkel and Shenhav, 2006), research (Harding, 1998; Smith, 1999; Harding, 2008), international law (Rodriguez-Pinero, 2006), and geography (Crush, 1993; Sidaway, 2000; Robinson, 2003).

7. Ong'wen says there were two triggers to the current Kenyan conflict. On 22 September 2007 Opposition Leader Odingaa declared that there would be no blanket amnesty for former heads of state if he was elected President. Former President Daniel Arap Moi and the current President Kibaki would be called to account personally for their corruption. This announcement came barely two weeks after it had been exposed that Moi and his family had stolen public money to the tune of 130 billion Kenya shillings ($US2 billion) and stashed it offshore (Ong'wen, 2008).

8. The cost of anti-corruption programs is embedded in this general figure, which is broken down to $US5.7 billion from the International Development Association, a World Bank central agency responsible for providing long-term interest-free loans to the world's 81 poorest countries, and another $US1.6 billion by the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the Bank Groups private sector arm.

9. Acres International, a Canadian engineering company, was convicted by the High Court in Lesotho in 2002 of obtaining lucrative construction contracts through bribery and graft. Ontario-based Acres is the first of 14 Western companies facing corruption charges to be convicted and fined for its role in bribing a senior government official to win contracts in the $8 billion Lesotho Highlands Water Project

10. In November 2003 three key former executives of the French oil giant Elf were jailed for up to five years over corrupt practices in Africa. The three were among 37 defendants on trial for illegally siphoning off an extraordinary €350 million of the then state-owned company's funds, from 1989 to 1993. Many of the missing millions were paid out in illegal "royalties" to various African leaders and their families in Gabon, Angola, Cameroon and Congo-Brazzaville. The payments were partly aimed at guaranteeing that it was Elf and not US or British firms that pumped the oil, but also to ensure the African leaders' allegiance to France (Igbikiowubo, 2003).
11. In mid-2004 the Kenyan government had planned to pay Anglo Leasing and Finance £20m for a sophisticated passport equipment system and another £29m for forensic science laboratories. But these services were never provided.
12. In Equatorial Guinea, BG plc (formerly the British Gas state company) closed a deal with the regime of President Teodoro Obiang to buy up the country's production of liquefied natural gas for the next 17 years. Britain's HSBC bank has been accused by a US Senate committee of helping Mr Obiang move cash from the country's oil revenues into financial "black holes" in Luxembourg and Cyprus. The country is threatened with repeated coups by outsiders keen to get their hands on the oil wealth. In Liberia, which has been beset by civil war, LIB, a private London bank, was behind attempts to monopolise alluvial diamond production and the country's telecommunications. The UN and the World Bank have criticised the schemes as secretive and against the country's interests. LIB has now withdrawn. In Angola, the victim of an even more destructive internal war, one of the UK's leading development banks, Standard Chartered, has been accused of damaging the country's economy by providing record multibillion dollar loans which give a stranglehold over future oil production (*The Guardian*, 2005).

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