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'Trust us – we're anthropologists'

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ABSTRACT:

Despite the populist sentiments of anthropology, our complicity with the agents and processes of capitalism makes an ethnography of it 'at the core' implausible. This difficulty is compounded by the niche we have established in the academic division of labour, by our customary objects of study, concepts and research methods, and by the ethical strictures we have imposed on ourselves. Most important, in approaching 'capitalism' we need a clearer understanding of the relationships between our own ideological commitments and the analytical use we make of notions of 'culture'. As an illustration of our incapacity I take the case of *corruption*, a topic of intense public interest on which anthropology has shed little light. To illustrate the *possibility* of an ethnography of 'capitalism at the core' I revert to the topic of *trust*, a more familiar issue in the theory and practice of anthropology on many levels – including the proprieties of our own research methods. If there are doubts about the probity of an ethnography of capitalism 'at the core', how far can we be trusted to pursue it in our customary terrain out there 'on the periphery'?

I can think of several historically-rooted reasons why an 'ethnography of capitalism at the core' seems an unlikely enterprise. As the defining method of anthropology, ethnography developed in '*pre-*' or '*non-capitalist*' contexts in which capitalism, in so far as it was contemplated at all, was regarded as intrusive and consequential rather than generative. As a method depending on direct intimate involvement with all aspects of our subjects' lives, ethnography places practical limits on the scale of research, putting comprehensive investigation of social processes as globally extensive as capitalism out of reach. 'Ethnography' at such levels can only be very selective and impressionistic, which implies that claims arising from such research must be treated with particular caution – especially those invoking 'culture', that other widely dispersed term of anthropological provenance. Nevertheless, the intensity of 'the ethnographic method' and the breadth of the conclusions which have been drawn from it have impressed other disciplines (politics, economics, sociology) which habitually deal more quantitatively with social processes on the large scale.

A more fundamental problem is that an 'ethnography of capitalism' is likely to confront us with the political forces of *ideology*, which relates uncomfortably to our various notions of 'culture'. One hazard is that 'culture' is taken to subsume and morally neutralise partisan ideas about power in social relations, effectively displacing 'ideology'. More critically, ideas associated with the centres of power are deemed 'ideological' while ordinary folk just have 'culture' – a conceptual collision that has confused a lot of thinking about, for example, development projects. Or again, the nasty bits of bourgeois behaviour are reckoned to be

‘ideological’, the harmless or pleasant parts ‘culture’. Meanwhile, it is all too easy to lose our grip on our own ideological predispositions as anthropologists. These have been loosely described as ‘populist’: our direct involvement as anthropologists with our subjects, usually for protracted periods, has given us a sentimental affinity with ‘little people’ on the margins of economic and political power and an antipathy to states, big business and modernity generally. We are ‘for’ particularity and diversity, and wary of the global and the monolithic, which is the current mode for describing capitalism. This disengagement limits our political capacity; we *hope* that others (preferably ‘the people’ themselves) will take up our comments and criticisms and use them wisely. However, this gut populism is at odds with our own historic involvement in the social class which, by definition, is the driving force of capitalism. This makes it both morally uncongenial and methodologically impractical to study its personnel and practices ‘objectively’ and at close quarters – at the ‘core’. We are prey to a latent ideological schizophrenia – a commitment to ‘our people, right or wrong’, in which the identity of ‘our people’ and ‘ourselves’ is often ambiguous and morally opaque.

Our populist constituency might expect us to use our skills to expose the *vices* of capitalism, which capitalists themselves might simply dismiss as morally expedient. I shall take *corruption* as a case in point: it is a matter of intense public interest these days, but while anthropologists have commented on its petty manifestations on the periphery, they have shown little capacity or stamina in tracking it up the feeding chain. To be fair, other social scientists working closer to the centres of political and economic power have not made much better sense of it ‘up there’. There has been much greater academic interest in a virtuous obverse of corruption, *trust*, on which the interests and activities of capitalists profoundly depend, both in business transactions and in maintaining class solidarity. The empirical and moral ease with which we might understand and represent the fabric of trust in business communities should put us on our guard. Its value in the social relations of exchange and consumption is more obvious and less equivocal than in the social relations of production, and it is not at all easy to tease-out the trust which makes for fair trade and wholesome food from the trust which consolidates poverty and exploitation. This should alert us to the ideological dilemmas lurking in ethnography everywhere, not just at the ‘core’ of capitalism.

There are different sorts of anthropology, and anthropologists with different sorts of scruple: you will have your own interests and understandings, and it is our purpose at this conference to compare notes. So, I have to begin, boringly, with a little clarification of my understanding of what an ‘The ethnography of capitalism at the “core”’ might imply.

I doubt that any of us will wish to get bogged down in definitions of ‘ethnography’. Because we’re anthropologists we all sort of know what it means.¹ A quick shake-down of college course web-pages in the US and the UK indicates that it entails some, rarely all of the following: a protracted period of fieldwork, participant observation, ‘total immersion’, an ‘emic’ perspective, conversations with real people, conscious acts of interpretation, and a ‘holistic’ purview. ‘There is no single definition of ethnography or uniform practice of ethnographic method, nor should there be’ declares the new Center for Ethnography at UC Irvine; ‘ethnographic practice responds and adapts to the field situation’.² This fly-on-the-wall pragmatism has made it easy to appropriate.³ Depending on where you’re standing, ethnography is ‘the observational branch of ethnology’ (Encarta 2002), ‘a form of applied anthropology’ (Fitzgerald 2005), ‘the fundamental research method of cultural anthropology’ (Hall [2007]), ‘a form of research focusing on the sociology of meaning’ (Garson [2007]), and either a ‘genre of writing’ (Wikipedia) or ‘the scientific description of peoples and cultures with reference to their particular customs and characteristics’ (OED electronic version). Although ethnography ‘sounds way too fuzzy and foreign to turn the heads of corporate types’ according to Michael Fitzgerald in *Technology Review*, it has for long been put to work in the world of business and commerce, via our adjunct profession of ‘Applied Anthropology’. ‘Certainly, in the past, it has been something of an oddity; the only ethnographers inside corporations were holed up at places like Xerox’s Palo Alto Research Center, where they worked on problems like how to make a photocopier’s On button more obvious to users.’

But while today ‘corporate ethnography is a blossoming field’ in the domain of industrial design⁴, it has little if any presence in the corridors of capitalist power (Fitzgerald 2005).

Reduced to a catch-phrase like ‘thick description’, ethnography could surely illuminate almost anything anywhere. *Prima facie* there should be no reason why anthropology, ‘the mapping of a continuously changing human diversity’ (Hannerz 2006: 24), should not strike right to the heart of capitalism; indeed ‘Marx as Ethnographer of Capitalism’ makes a lively lecture heading in a course on ‘The History of Anthropological Thought’.⁵ But as anthropologists I think we are obliged to place heavier epistemological demands on this, our principal empirical tool, particularly if we want to take it to the centres of political-economic power.⁶ Many would assume that the central purpose of ethnographic method is to reveal its equally malleable conceptual counterpart, *culture*. Here I am at a disadvantage, having spent all my working life avoiding the use of this word, essentially because I have no coherent idea what it means, or to what analytical purposes it may best be put. But one thing seems clear: ‘culture’ may be an epiphenomenon of capitalism, but capitalism itself is not a ‘cultural’ phenomenon. To be pedantic, capitalism is a political description of social relations which are a consequence of the development of the material means of production – in this particular historic case the large-scale consequences of industrial development. In Marxian orthodoxy, ‘capital’ is the means of appropriating surplus-value – the part of production not returned to the labourer as the wage which s/he needs to survive. The theory of surplus-value and the materialist conception of history imply that ‘the manner in which life and its requirements are produced, determines in the last instance the social ideas and institutions of the time or historical epoch’.⁷ ‘Capitalism’ is seldom used by those privileged in this relationship to identify themselves or their activities, and is more usually used critically or pejoratively by or on behalf of those they exploit. In other words, ‘capitalism’ is a complex of ideas about material power, an *ideology* which its critics identify and see as lying under the cover of the ‘false consciousness’ of its beneficiaries. Despite superficial similarities, this is not ‘culture’ as it has been deployed by any sort of anthropologist, or in its largely meaningless media derivatives.⁸ It can certainly not be taken to identify or define capitalism, without dissolving the meaning of the term. Those who talk about the culture/s of capitalism are usually marxisante in their intentions, but the hybrid usage and metaphoric derivatives of ‘capital’ are a source of conceptual confusion.⁹ Picking up ‘cultural’ cues are at least as likely to lead to other axes of ‘the economy’ like ‘consumption’ or ‘exchange’, neither of which defines ‘capitalism’, however illuminating detailed accounts of these may be.¹⁰ In so far as ‘culture’ inclines to moral relativism (painfully in such usages as ‘multiculturalism’) it is an ideologically uncritical concept which, in the suspicious mind of the Marxist, disposes anyone who tries to make analytical use of it susceptible to ‘false consciousness’ of all sorts.

On another matter of definition: we are likely to have different views about what might constitute the ‘core’ of capitalism. Core personnel? Practices? Ideas? Networks? I associate the term with the current preoccupation with ‘globalism’, and imagine it as contrasted with a plural ‘periphery’ (the more familiar stamping-ground of anthropology). In one sense ‘core’ seems to imply theoretical or ideological essence; in another, institutions of a metropolitan order, and thus a congeries of loci (Wall street, Microsoft, Ingenta, whatever). Ideas and institutions can both be imagined messily as ‘assemblages’ of global power (Ong & Collier 2005), although this notion seems to appeal to those who see the expansion of capitalism as pervasively immanent rather than focused in the manner of a ‘core’. If ‘core’ there be, and if our approach at this conference proposes to be ‘human centred’, and if ethnography is to have any part it, then I take it sociologically to imply an elite of real-live persons who, in terms of wealth and power, epitomise the interests, identity and values of the ruling class.¹¹ The problem with which ‘globalism’ struggles to come to terms is that this class can no longer be located coherently in space, in a small number of metropolitan centres, but is strung out across the surface of the earth and linked in ways largely unknown to Marx. How they might be brought sufficiently into focus for us to apply ‘ethnographic’ methods is, I assume, one of the main objects of our current discussion.

The reason that we are even bothering with the topic is that intelligent people out there – not just anthropologists – imagine that ethnography may illuminate what is actually going on, in ways which other modes of research have not. It seems we are all ethnographers now – the term is well established in adjacent disciplines as an omnibus label for various forms of qualitative research: observing and chatting to manageably small numbers of people and intuiting and extrapolating wider relevance. But it is surely odd that a device which developed in association with the comparative study of races and nationalities within the rubric of imperialism should still name the way we study coteries of transnational political elites. I take it to be the groupiness of this class-core which we imagine to be most amenable to the classic ‘microscopic’ anthropological method of personal engagement in interpersonal relations.¹² It also seems to signal assumptions about the *closure* of their ideas, hence my concerns about ‘culture’ with its cosy ethics of ‘(w)holism’.

Global capitalism is just too big a phenomenon for our familiar, intimate anthropological methods, which is probably why we have seized on that notion of a groupy ‘core’. *That* we can comfortably get our minds around. The anthropological rhetoric for getting at this elevated nitty-gritty has been called ‘studying-up’ (Nader 1972), a brazen excursion from our lowly domain, up the bureaucratic or social class hierarchy, most usually in pursuit of those persons and institutions concerned with the ‘development’ of the folks who are our base-line subjects.¹³ The recent inspiration has come in large measure from anthropological intrusions into laboratories and clinics with the purpose of demystifying and de-hegemonising science (but isn’t this ‘studying-across’, or ‘-in’, rather than ‘-up’?) The Berkeley epiphany is that we *can* study our professional colleagues, and startle them by exoticising what they consider normal, and normalising what they consider exotic.¹⁴ George Marcus and his colleagues have worked hard to convince us that we have the right – even the obligation – to make these outward and upward excursions, pitching our tents in a multitude of ‘*sites*’ around the global village.¹⁵

‘Studying-up’ provides a vertiginous thrill for anthropologists and, some old die-hard cynics would complain, an escape from the bugs, diseases and intractable dialects of the ‘real’ fieldwork which has been our traditional rite of passage. For a discipline which has made a speciality of ‘studying-down’ this change of direction is fraught with hazards. The populist motive usually sets us out on a witch-hunt, in which ‘good’ is ‘down’ and ‘bad’ is ‘up’, a demonising of the institutions and processes which we reckon are victimising our friends on ‘the periphery’.¹⁶ I take as a case in point Jim Ferguson’s much admired and widely referenced study of *The Anti-politics Machine* in Lesotho. Ferguson characterises his approach to the CIDA-sponsored Thaba-Tseka project as ‘vivisection’ (1990: xvi) – an unfriendly term he does not apply to his subtle and sympathetic exposé of the political economy of Basotho cattle husbandry (‘the Bovine Mystique’) which the Thaba-Tseka officials fail utterly to comprehend. In the opening sequences of his book, Ferguson picks up the 1975 World Bank Country Report on Lesotho, and deconstructs it as though it were a sinister object dropped from another galaxy. Its authors are hegemonic automata rather than real, identifiable people, so of course there is little prospect that they could be comprehended in essentially the same terms as the folks of Ferguson’s ‘Mashai’ village. We have been promised a ‘thick’ ethnography of development planners for decades now, but nobody seems able to deliver it.¹⁷ Maybe in the final analysis the old anthropological adage holds true, that you have to love Your People before you can do them ethnographic justice. And who could possibly love a bureaucrat?

In Ferguson’s interpretivist scheme, ideas are as ‘real’ in their effect as any other kind of action, and ultimately more interesting than what individual people actually do. This allows him to ascribe to the Thaba-Tseka officials as a very diffuse, depersonalized sort of agency. This emerges as a tendency to reify the project as an undifferentiated ‘it’ (‘When the project set itself down in Thaba-Tseka it quickly found itself in the position not of a craftsman approaching his raw materials, but more like that of a bread crumb thrown into an ants’ nest...’ (Ferguson 1990: 225)). Ferguson presumes the falsity of the development planners’

consciousness, representing them in very alienated terms as subservient to the values of international capital masquerading as the technically efficient pursuit of progress. An international development 'discourse' does the thinking for them, a technocratic mode which studiously disinvests political-economic reality, and thus undermines its own capacities to create change. The 'institutionalized production of such ideas' (p.xv) 'simultaneously constructs Lesotho as a particular kind of object of knowledge, and creates a structure of knowledge around that object' (p.xiv). The discourse, in other words, takes on a life of its own. Though impossible to prove, it explains why 'intentional plans are always important, but never in quite the way planners imagined' (p.20). It is hard to argue with this sort of assertion because it is not much more than that – an assertion, in which 'ethnography' plays a very mysterious role.

Ferguson inhabits a familiarly populist world of wicked states, dumb planners, nice rural folks and intelligent social scientists. He reiterates his faith in the privileged capacity of the academy in general and anthropology in particular to demystify, but extends little hope for an instrumentally *useful* development praxis. Change will come about in this region despite planned development efforts. He feels that his interpretation 'does, perhaps, offer a form of engaging one's intellectual and scholarly energies with the work of political and social transformation in a way that is consistent with the democratic and populist commitments that so many anthropologists share' (Ferguson 1990: 288). 'Development' here means 'empowering, progressive social changes' (p.285). We can now confidently and respectably go to the aid of popular 'counter-hegemonic organizations and institutions', like 'labor unions, opposition political parties and movements, cooperatives, peasants' unions, churches and religious organizations, and so on' (p.287).

If the name of game is interpretive subtlety, my complaint would be that it has not gone nearly far enough. From my own encounters in the field, I can see big gaps between how 'ordinary people' out/down there talk about the agents of government and business, and how anthropologists themselves represent these agents. In conversation, images of horizontal sprawl emerge at least as often as superimposed hierarchies and 'cores': a different topography of 'us' and 'them' with walls, doors and pathways and chasms in unexpected places. 'Ordinary people' pretty well everywhere do not seem to think of bureaucrats in the depersonalised, disembodied terms that bureaucrats need to think of themselves. Behind these frustrating walls and doors there are no cybertrons or demigods, just small groups of mortals who, like the rest of us, are distracted from their formal functions by the persistent need to eat, shit, fornicate, struggle to control their mates and progeny, and get an extra buck or two. That is probably why there is so much interest in the President's bowels, sexual appetites and IQ: knowing these things affords better purchase on his public behaviour than his official utterances. Hierarchy is the protective gestalt of the powerful, who imagine it as tapering to an apex where the number of personnel is in inverse proportion to the demographic scale of their responsibilities. For them, exclusiveness connotes efficiency, but as the classic sociologists explained, the closer we get to the top of the heap the more singularly the individual human beings (the President, the CEO) and their personal foibles emerge ('JJ' of the old *Observer* cartoon). Indeed, a textbook maxim is that the effective functioning of bureaucracy actually depends on those same personal pragmatics (nepotism, graft) which the rules of bureaucracy explicitly prohibit. This is an aspect of government which registers very clearly in the popular imagination. It's only the Emperor's Altogether that allows him to get away with more mischief than the rest of us. It's the most obvious zone for an ethnographic showdown for anyone not averse to spending a lot of time in jail.

Disciplinary competence

If we are offering ethnography as a revelatory device, is it up to the job? Research in a Bengali village is hard enough, but the inner sanctums of the World Bank look utterly forbidding. Anthropological efforts to 'study up' rarely get there, and if they do it is usually by assuming somebody else's identity and methods (sociology, economics, psychology). Nothing puts us in our disciplinary place quite so bluntly as our *exclusion* from the everyday

life of 'capitalism at the core'. Our populist inclinations have compounded the conceptual gap we now seek to close: we have reified, segregated and fragmented the 'periphery', even while presuming the monolithic unity of 'global capitalism'.¹⁸ The academy is victim to excessively divided labour, balkanised to something approaching conceptual immobility and reduced, as Andrew Abbott (2001) has memorably described, to chaotic, infinitely regressive differences of opinion, as individuals struggle to differentiate their academic products. The political character of this arena is one of segmental opposition and unevenly distributed weight, rather than organic solidarity. Grumble as we anthropologists may, the corridors of power have been possessed by other disciplines, centrally economics and marginally sociology, and are dealt with in different terms. It is the declared ambition of neo-classical / liberal economic purists to draw *all* human behaviour, all considerations of nature and nurture, into their professional purview. Since the seasonal decline of marxist economics, the terms of this imperial expansion have been set by the liberal logic of individual competition in markets unfettered by extraneous political controls, with dyads of actors engaged rationally in instantaneous transactions. Agents at the core account for their own behaviour and interpret the behaviour of others in terms of this logic, and their academic colleagues get special Nobel prizes for refining the analytical instruments and rhetoric on which they depend. Critics within economics and more abundantly beyond it dwell on the pervasive imperfections of behaviour in this model, pointing to the problems of abstracting 'pure' economic transactions (the *ceteris paribus* clause) from their 'embeddedness' in other modes of action and interaction.¹⁹ This has thrown a Polanyian line to those anthropologists still fretting about the substantive meanings of economics, and some opportunities to weave ethnographic observations into economic analysis.²⁰

Sociologists, dealing professionally with categories of person and types of interaction on a much larger social scale than anthropology, and using methods based on numbers and literacy to illuminate the sorts of society which academics themselves inhabit, are more likely students of capitalism than we are. Nevertheless, they share many of our professional strictures, and for all of us it is plain that other people outside the academy are getting much closer to 'capitalism at the core' than we are. Although ethnography has antecedents in popular travel writing, there is not much we social scientists can do that good journalists can't do as well or better.²¹ They have fewer inhibitions – moral, legal, tactical, intellectual – and although we may complain that they are slicker and quicker than we are, the public is overwhelmingly more likely to be advised by them than by us. It is notable that the quasi-journalistic (and wholly admirable) *Anthropology Today* has become the main outlet for those of us writing here in the UK about these sorts of topic. For a very long time the circumstantial study of capitalism 'at the core' has been accomplished by writers of fiction, from Balzac and Zola through to Norman Mailer and Michael Lewis. If you want an idea about how people in/out/up there live, watch the classic movie *Wall Street* and its many cribs and clones, or revel again in TV sitcoms like *The Office* or *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, or read P.J.O'Rourke's *Eat the rich*, or the tabloid revelations on Black and Murdoch. If you are still sceptical, read the biographies of the great robber barons, or the confessions of rascals like Graef Crystal (*In Search of Excess*). These days, capitalists at the core seem unabashed about revealing their own nakedness – if you still have the appetite, take a look at Michael Eisner's disarmingly coy *Work in Progress*.

Class complicity

It would surely be shamefully ironic if getting at the truth was more feasible outside the academy than in it. If we anthropologists are inclined to dismiss our economist colleagues as comprador capitalists, we should pause and examine our own ideological dispositions.²² Our professional populist attitudes are at odds with a much more deeply rooted complicity with the rise of capitalism, which makes it at best difficult for us to study its structures and personnel 'objectively', and easier to pursue its processes consequentially among its victims 'on the periphery'. It was the merchants who funded the first universities, and their scholarly sons who went on to build up the rationales for private and public enterprise. As Albert Hirschman (1977) has famously explained, they elaborated the ideas of rational self-interest, individual freedom, profit, contract and office which have been the making of the modern world. This is reflected in our ambiguous status as *quasi*-professionals, awkwardly in cahoots with the

classic fiduciary servants of the powerful, the doctors, clerics, soldiers and lawyers.²³ Those academics who are aware of this dilemma and wish to retain a critical focus on capitalism have been drawn to Gramsci, who has offered us the role of ‘organic intellectual’ in the class struggle. Not many seem to recognise that Gramsci thus invited us to commit ‘class suicide’, which may help to explain why, in the post-this-and-that phase of cultural studies, the vices of capitalism have got washed away in aimless rhetoric, whose main function is to make ourselves sound smarter rather than ringing our own death knell. Public confidence in academics is not very high; it is worth repeating that in common parlance the word ‘academic’ has come to mean ‘irrelevant’: ‘it’s all academic now’ we say when one football team is incontrovertibly trouncing another.²⁴

Ethical constraints

In a sense we (ethnographers, anthropologists) are already at the core of capitalism. So what is there to know? Do you wonder how capitalists mate, or what they have for breakfast? Check out the gossip columns. You may well be puzzled about how they do business, but don’t expect them to spill their tactical secrets in the interests of science or ethnography. And if you still imagine that you are a free intellectual agent, contemplate for a moment the strictures which your own professional affiliation has placed on your quest for truth.

Paul Rabinow’s paradigmatic ‘ethnographic account’ (Rabinow 1996: 1) of the Cetus Corporation (*Making PCR: A story of biotechnology*) is indistinguishable in form and substance from ‘serious’ journalism à la *New Yorker*. I reckon that this is how he licensed himself to name real names. By contrast, in what looks like an apology for being able to write much less about the Thaba-Tseka project management than he actually knew, Ferguson explains in a ‘Post-script on sources’ (1990: 226) how he was gagged by issues of professional discretion. In the good-old-days we were answerable to our consciences in the conduct of fieldwork, now we are professionally invited to avoid those responsibilities by not doing the research we want to, or to evade them by having our subjects sign-off on our notes, pictures, narratives etc. Conscientious efforts to get ‘informed consent’ in, say, the Amazon rainforest are comically bizarre. In the US, and increasingly in Europe, projects are being heavily circumscribed by regulations protecting human subjects.²⁵ These controls (which began with medical research on real bodies, and moved on to experimental psychology and sociology) now favour numbers over qualities and anonymous synchronic surveys, and make detailed circumstantial observations over time increasingly impractical (records identifying persons must be destroyed). Beyond the obviously lethal areas of research on children, mental health or physical disability, the regulations have made empirical study of any sort of illegal activity well nigh impossible. The effect of this intellectual protectionism, of course, is to discourage many projects at their inception and to drive others underground.

The declared purpose of ethical policing is to protect the vulnerable, and no doubt it has gone some way to assist that. But the protection of those lowly citizens who might be injured by publicity also extends to those whose identity might be laid bare spectacularly by research on the small-scale groupiness at ‘the core’ of capitalism. It is rather harder to write candidly about ‘top management in BP’ than the easily-pseudonymised ‘*Village in Turkmenistan*’ or ‘*Crack vendors in the barrio*’, not least because of the fear of heavy-duty legal reprisals. And yet it is the indictable wickedness in precisely that sort of context that the public to whom we might imagine ourselves to be answerable are most avidly interested.

Corruption

The World Bank assures us that ‘corruption’ costs the world in excess of a trillion dollars a year – though how they arrive at that figure is anybody’s guess.²⁶ Add-in the other schemes and scams, the ‘executive overcompensation’, stock options, golden parachutes and so on, and who knows how much all this high-powered malfeasance is costing us little people. A recent collection of anthropological essays (Haller and Shore 2005) acknowledges that corruption is a hard nut to crack: the topic is ‘slippery and protean’, ‘polysemous and diffuse’, ‘hidden’ and ‘occult’. Corruption is ‘both everywhere and nowhere’, defies measurement, and is

most evident in its denial. For sure, the phenomenon is inherently obscure – corrupt transactions are unlikely to be very overt – but the obscurity is at least as much in the eyes of us, the beholders.

Ethnography has made a business of demystifying the mysterious, of studying the apparently intractable, so why should it be so thwarted by corruption? Retracing the difficulties I have identified here for studying ‘capitalism at the core’, it is evident that anthropology has had a good deal of success in documenting corruption *on the periphery* – witness the recent illuminating collection by Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2006), or Smith (2006), or several essays in the Haller and Shore collection. At that level we are more at home, on grounds of disciplinary competence, populist instinct, and the handling of matters of ethical discretion. But the ‘problem’ of corruption does not originate in the village, it emanates from ‘up there’ in the bureaucracy. What in modern times we have been calling corruption is a by-product of the formal rules that seek to separate persons from the offices they hold. The principle that you must have an office to abuse in order to be corrupt was as familiar to the Chinese administrator-philosopher Wang An Shi in the 11th century, and the Tunisian Ibn Khaldûn in the 14th century, as to Max Weber in the 20th. All three recognized that having an identity that is detachable from your body requires an institutional framework which incorporates enough social power and privilege to keep the profitable political-economic game running long enough, and on a large enough scale. And when things go wrong it's some body rather than the system that gets the blame.

The institution which has provided the main framework for doing business, government and corruption today is the *corporation*. This is the transcendent meta-body which has been the making of modernity, and it is the institutional rubric within which all employed academics function. Chambers Dictionary tells us that the corporation is ‘a succession or collection of people authorized by law to act as one individual and regarded as having a separate existence from the people who are its members’. (Its second meaning, more than incidentally, is ‘a belly, esp. a pot belly’.) Today's corporation is no freak of nature, no historical accident. It was invented by European merchants in the 15th century, along with enough moral latitude to allow great commercial ventures to flourish, and many rogues to prosper. The earliest Oxford English Dictionary citation (1425) of the modern meaning of corruption as ‘perversion from uprightness and fidelity in the discharge of duty’ dates from this epoch. The corporation developed simultaneously as an instrument of commerce and of government, a political-economic symbiosis essential to the making of modern states in the 19th century and transnational enterprises in the 20th. Responsibilities have always shuttled back and forth between the public and private corporate domains, with the nationalizing of private enterprises (mining, transport) and the privatizing of government (prisons, public welfare). The great benefit of the corporation is that it allows real people to join forces for private gain, to mask their personal identities, dodge their liabilities and defy mortality. Moral ambivalence is intrinsic to the corporation. It is the framework in which individuals are piously held to account, and yet can get away with almost anything. ‘Did you ever expect a corporation to have a conscience,’ asked an 18th-century English Lord Chancellor, ‘when it has no soul to be damned, and no body to be kicked?’²⁷

Our difficulties in understanding corruption closer to centres of power can be traced to centuries of scholarly complicity in the construction of the modern institutions (firms, bureaucracies, principles of rational self-interest, universities) which provide the social and moral contexts in which corruption routinely occurs. The scholarly reflex has been to try to draw corruption into the normative framework, to make it ‘more transparent’, and to try to make the ‘unwritten rules’ of corruption formally evident. But imagining such a pragmatic vice as another rule-bound system, a sort of anti-bureaucracy which may be reclaimed and manipulated by decent officials, is unlikely to see much further than the banality of broken rules. Other disciplines have not made much more headway with these problems. In the liberal economist's view, corruption is ambiguously an inevitable consequence of self-interested transactions in free markets, or more moralistically, an ‘imperfection’ in such

markets. The strategic response is that if we can take a firmer theoretical grip on how corruption is done, we will have the administrative tools to outdo it.²⁸ Like other regulatory processes this is, of course, at odds with liberal principles, which encourage a *laissez faire* attitude in others. If ‘corruption’ is how people – especially little people dealing with predatory bureaucrats – actually get things done, then efforts to stamp it out may be as detrimental to their welfare as to the functioning of ‘the system’ at large. This has made anthropologists in particular uneasy about exposing grass-roots tactics for dealing with corruption: detailing petty corruption reveals the extent to which, in lengthy feeding chains, the lowest levels are vitally concerned with just that: *food*. This takes us back to the old problem that writing about such matters is very much more likely to inform the economically and politically powerful, than to be of strategic advantage to our village friends. By the same token, those in the upper reaches of the feeding chain are unlikely to want *their* misdemeanours catalogued and broadcast, by ethnographers or anyone else.

The point here is that if we, as ethnographers, are duped by the corporate logic, we will make very little progress in demystifying corruption. Anthropologists (myself included) have contributed to the massive critical outpouring on the most conspicuous recent case of corporate malfeasance, the collapse of the Texas-based energy giant Enron.²⁹ The commentaries are of course all wisdom after the event, which for me is very evocative of so much of the anthropological literature on development: pathological reports on projects which have already collapsed. Enron is not blamed for being a corporation; Kenny Lay and Geoff Skilling are blamed for breaking the rules, and for that they are respectively dead and in jail. But what would an ethnographer actually have done, if they happened to be working in Enron, studying ‘capitalism at the core’ before the scandal broke? Would they have pre-empted the malfeasance, or would they have allayed the moral opprobrium? Would they (as several of the contributors to Haller and Shore’s collection have suggested) have scrutinised ‘discourse’, the business-talk in Enron to reveal how the behaviour of embodied individuals was culturally circumscribed? If so, I can imagine this ending up in court as *force majeure* mitigating the defendants’ pleas: ‘*It was my culture that made me do it, your Honour...*’

Anthropologists interested in this topic seem assured that exposing the ‘culture/s of corruption’ is our discipline’s strongest suit. We are good at interpreting how behaviour which looks bad from the outside gets ‘normalised’ on the inside. In her essay on Enron in the Haller and Shore collection on corruption, Carol MacLennan is enthusiastic about ethnographic methods: ‘Anthropology’s tools and perspectives on culture can shift our framework toward research that helps explain how corruption has found a home in corporate institutions, is self-reinforcing and insular, and spills out into our political institutions, challenging our democratic foundations’ (2005: 169). Would that we could actually fulfil that tall order. MacLennan proposes two sorts of research, a judicious blend of the socio and the cultural: ‘(1) examination of kinship, social networks, socialization strategies and mechanisms that maintain cohesion in corporate culture; and (2) investigation of market values and their role in institutions of American social life’ (p. 166). Democratic foundations, cohesion in corporate culture, American social life... Can we depend on such a value-laden agenda to come to terms with the anomia, the sheer physical hardship and misery, generated from within capitalism at the core?

Trust

Corruption is bad, selfish, and professionally inaccessible. *Trust*, on the other hand, is good, altruistic, a comfortably familiar topic for anthropology, though not half as exciting as corruption. Here is something we can surely pursue at the core of capitalism. Indeed, in so far as corruption is a breach of confidence, trust may be our best point of re-entry to discussion of the vice. But that raises some interesting reflexive questions about who is trusting whom to do what.

Corruption is a fast, fly-by-night, under-the-counter sort of activity – anyone can fall for it at the drop of a fiver. Trust on the other hand takes time – lots of time, as Parker Shipton’s

recent monograph on trans-generational ‘entrustment’ among the Luo makes beautifully clear. Its importance in the death-defying ruse of the business *corporation* is striking. Trust also takes lots of people – it is embedded in larger, durable social fields. As business people know very well, and as economists who have turned their minds to the institutional contexts of transactions have realised, trust is imperative to the functioning and expansion of capitalism. It is a valuable commodity in its own right, appropriated, accumulated, bought and sold.³⁰ It is the one asset that the professional cannot do without – without trust, skills, fame, diplomas, civic honours and all the other trappings are never enough. What price the super-qualified lawyer or proctologist who wittingly betrays her fiduciary relationships with her clients?

Economists, for whom trust has been endlessly fascinating, have struggled to deconstruct what we might call its moral economy. If only trust could be *impersonal*, dis-embedded and dealt with by efficient brokers, just think how much more useful it would be! Again, the corporation is the favoured instrument in this mythic craving. In a classic paper, the economic sociologist Susan Shapiro identified trust as ‘a social relationship in which principals – for whatever reason or state of mind – invest resources, authority, or responsibility in another to act on their behalf for some uncertain future return’ (1987: 626). She explored the agencies which have developed historically to extend trust from its ‘origins’ in family and community out into the wider arenas of modern commerce. There, ‘By definition, the principals of impersonal trust are vulnerable and impotent... Even though they are dealing with strangers, these principals nonetheless put their lives, their fortunes, and their understandings of the world at considerable risk’ (p. 635). Hence the need for professional and corporate ‘guardians’ of trust; but alas their presence only serves to create ‘an inflationary spiral of escalating trust relationships’ and new sorts of liability: ‘almost all these guardianship arrangements are ripe for corruption’ (p. 646). ‘So who guards the guardians? Trust does’ – creating further demands for ‘guardianship’ which turn the desire to ‘impersonalise’ trust into ‘a potentially self-defeating prophecy’ (p. 649).

The implication that trust is not a publicly tradeable commodity is a reminder of its prime function in *closing* groups and keeping transactions within the range of circumstantially known persons. This is the essence of class solidarity, tragically elusive for the proletarian mass, but so much easier for the groupy elites who are the owners of capital. Capitalism depends on interpersonal confidence within class boundaries as much as it depends on perpetuating alienation across class boundaries. Trust is, like so much else in this wicked world, ambivalent. It seems that ethnographic methods could help to demystify the ‘guardianship’ dilemma by insisting on the *re-personalisation* of our understanding of capitalist agency ‘at the core’, recasting trust in terms of bodies, passions, personalities and other particularities. Caitlin Zaloom (2006) has essayed this brilliantly in her comparative account of financial traders in Chicago and London, explaining how the networks of persons and personalities that make the real-live trading pit work, and how these extend to contexts in which trading is electronically ‘virtual’. Zaloom’s work is also a reminder that venturing ethnographically into the ‘core’ of capitalism is not just a matter of dragging worldly wickedness down to our size and observational capacities. To study the human relations of capitalism, we need to be very savvy technically, both about the elaborate body-language of the ‘pit’ *and* about the electronic movements of wealth and power – as Keith Hart (2000) has so persuasively argued. Those of us fumbling with our keyboards and cursing Bill Gates may wonder how that will ever happen.

To affirm that ‘trust’ as a vital commodity emanates from psychic and social complexity (who you play golf with, the colour of their skin, their coded identity in an ‘anonymous’ share bid) does not present us directly with a general theory of its forms and sources, which remain largely mysterious. In popular parlance all this gets heaped into the rag-bag of ‘culture’, which social scientists have gratefully volunteered to unpack. In this idiom, Holmes and Marcus (2005) have offered some ideas about how we should approach ethnographically ‘cultures of expertise and the management of globalization’. The secret, they suggest, is to recognise that our comrades ‘the experts’ in the world of big business are themselves ‘para-ethnographers’, analysing and writing-up their own lives and circumstances, but doing so ‘intuitively’ and

‘anecdotally’ rather than with our professional finesse. There is no doubt that Holmes and Marcus propose to busy themselves at the core of capitalism, but the business ‘culture’ they have in mind here is not driven by class interests but by something they call ‘the statistical mode of knowledge production’ (p. 236). Their key illustration in this article is a pastiche of ‘fragments from Bob Woodward’s book on [Alan] Greenspan’ which they say reveals ‘how the para-ethnographic engages the “darkly unknowable”’ (p. 239). To bring this into anthropological daylight we have to ‘re-functionalise’ our own professional version of ethnography to embrace the para-ethnography of others: ‘we seek to connect this sort of inquiry to more conventionally social and cultural factors that underpinned traditional ethnography’ (236). This in turn will help us develop ‘the appropriate version of the interpretive tradition of seeking to understand “native points of view”’ (p. 251). It all seems very amiable, but do I sound sceptical?

Capitalism and the ideologies of ethnography

Of course our ventures into the core of capitalism should oblige us to reconsider the techniques of ethnography and its provenance out there in our old stamping grounds on the imperial periphery. So much about our ethnography (which, you may admit, is commonly as ‘anecdotal’ and ‘intuitive’ as Mr Greenspan’s) has to be taken on trust. As habitually lonely observers we extrapolate, from the activities we contingently observe, to culture, those mysterious ‘webs of significance’ suspended in time and space which give activities their direction.³¹ The deceptive ease with which we do this has bothered honest anthropologists since the inception of the discipline. The heroes of anthropology have always struggled with the problem of discriminating what is generalisably ‘normal’ from everyday happenstance, and how the difference might be detected by watching and getting involved in what people actually do and say (Raymond Firth juggling with the distinction between ‘structure’ and ‘organisation’, Fredrik Barth with the ‘normative’ and the ‘pragmatic’). The sweeping claims we make in the name of ‘culture’ are wonderfully captivating, but how we get from empirical observation to cultural abstractions ultimately affects our academic colleagues’ judgments of our intellectual probity. If culture is basically what we declare it to be, it inexorably it makes a critical object of our own interpretive organs. To palliate this, we are urged to reflect overtly and diligently on what we are deducing, and on the entanglements of our personal ‘webs of meaning’ with those we ourselves are attempting to spin around our subjects.

The anthropological niche has been built on the assumption that culture as a generalisable concept about the human condition can be more readily detected by exposing ourselves to its exotic manifestations, and riding on the shock-wave of contrast with what we take for granted in our own system of values. This revelatory auto-exoticisation has always been one of anthropology’s big selling points, keeping our introductory classes remarkably well subscribed: in late adolescence we are exquisitely receptive to weirdness, especially when its discovery in ‘the other’ makes a weirdness of our own boring old normality.³² But as the post-colonial criticism of ethnography has made amply clear, the plausibility of this enterprise has depended as much on our knowingness about ‘us’ as the knowledgeability of the conclusions we draw about ‘them’. I do not doubt the need for introspection about how we do our work – that is surely a condition of any conscious intellectual endeavour. My complaint is that reflexivity is fast becoming involuted – we are getting bogged-down in reflections on reflexivity itself, and indiscriminate about what we most urgently need to understand about ourselves, our discipline and our methods. Obsessive reflexivity traps the unwary in an infinity of regressive *personal* reflections from which there is no intellectual escape. The proposal that we can and should deal authoritatively with capitalism puts a much bigger issue on the top of the introspective agenda: how we can come to terms with our own ideological predispositions.

In a recent polemic for *Anthropology Today* Steven Sangren doubts that anthropology can sustain the degree of critical introspection we have come to expect of it: ‘To put it bluntly, anthropology as a form of knowledge practice – like all forms of knowledge practice – encompasses *systemic defences* against, oddly, an anthropology of itself – that is to say, against anthropological reflexivity’ (Sangren 2007: 15). I read this as a challenge in the cultural idiom

of cultural anthropologists themselves to the obsession with introspection. Sangren points out that reflexivity has been about text, not institutions – ‘including the immediate contexts of academic social life and careers in which the production of anthropological knowledge and authority occurs’ (p. 14). Without disagreeing, I would pose the problem slightly differently: the basic theoretical assumptions of anthropology (or any other discipline) are indeed self-validating, in the same way that ideology (or in another rhetoric ‘culture’) is self-validating.³³ It is the job of any ideology to define truth, not propagate uncertainty. Who needs dubious knowledge? Well, recently for many anthropologists the answer, laden with postmodern irony, has been ‘we do’. Certainty has come to connote hubris, hegemony, teleology, and lots of other nasty things, all scourged with new vocabularies of tough-talk.³⁴ The last thing that such an anthropologist would wish to be suspected of is an ideological predisposition, but to imagine that the concept of ‘culture’ obviates this is illusory.

There may be lots of things anthropologists can study without being greatly concerned about this problem, but capitalism is not one of them. As soon as you have professed an interest in that topic, you are morally engaged. And so, of course, you might be in any of those other anthropological topics in which you might seek a safe retreat. So, how will you reveal your political predilections, and in what respects will that make you more or less trustworthy? Maybe we can extract a vision for anthropology from the mish-mash of values we call populism? Or maybe we should declare our class affiliations (rather as our economist colleagues do) and use them either to promote free market liberalism, or else to infiltrate and subvert the ranks of the powerful in defence of socialism. Maybe our research proposals and monographs should not be prefaced with a long pre-emptive reflexive cringe, but with a stern health warning: *This is how I think the world is, and this is how I believe it should be. Trust me, I’m an anthropologist.*

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NOTES:

1. I see no reason to separate anthropology and ethnography – for example on grounds of theory/method. 'In anthropology, or anyway social anthropology, what the practitioners do is ethnography. And it is in understanding what ethnography is, or more exactly *what doing ethnography is*, that a start can be made toward grasping what anthropological analysis is as a form of knowledge' (Geertz 1973: 5-6).
2. <http://www.socsci.uci.edu/~ethnog/>, consulted November 2007. 'The Center will support innovative collaborative ethnographic research as well as research on the theoretical and methodological refunctioning of ethnography for contemporary cultural, social and technological transformations.'
3. Recent appropriations are a 'You Tube Ethnography Project' and a mysterious embryonic *ethnography.com*.
4. Check out the Intel/Microsoft website for the November 2005 *Ethnographic Praxis in Industry* conference. Papers included 'The Worst Technology for Girls?' and 'Social Relationships In The Modern Tribe: Product Selection As Symbolic Markers'. (<http://www.epic2005.com/abstracts.html> accessed November 2007). See also the 'Ethnography Primer' on the website for AIGA, the New York based 'professional

association for design': www.aiga.org/content.cfm/ethnography-primer (Accessed November 2007).

5. Course syllabus for Professor Ellen Schattschneider's course on the *History of Anthropological Thought* at Brandeis University, Fall 2006. The accompanying reading is Marx *Capital* volume I, chapters 1-2.

www.brandeis.edu/departments/anthro/courses/syllabi/2006/Anth201_F06.doc (accessed November 2007)

6. 'Ethnographers cannot help but lie' says Gary Fine breezily, 'but in lying, we reveal truths that escape those who are not so bold' (1993: 291).

7. I draw here on the succinct entry on 'capital' by Eduard Bernstein in the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

8. I recently counted seven references to the 'culture' of this and that (drug abuse, healthy eating, road rage, police informing, etc) in a 45 minute span of the BBC *Today* programme.

9. For example, 'the soul of capitalism – on a global scale' or 'the cultural circuit of capital' (Olds & Thrift 2005).

10. See for example Daniel Miller's cultural approach to capitalism in Trinidad (1997); and see Little's review (1998).

11. See Mills 1956.

12. Recall Geertz's interpretivist proposal of the 'three characteristics of ethnographic description: it is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the "said" of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in pursuable terms... But there is, in addition, a fourth characteristic of such description, at least as I practice it: it is microscopic' (Geertz 1973: 21).

13. Donald MacKenzie has recently defined 'studying up' as 'researching those higher in the socio-economic scale' (2007: 23).

14. This is how I recently heard a young anthropologist characterising the essential mission of anthropology.

15. The vagueness of this term is captured in student bloopers (and occasionally even in print): '*multi-sided*', '*multi-cited*', and even on one visionary occasion '*multi-sighted*'.

16. One instance of this which lingers on is my excursion into the management of a big irrigation development project in Ethiopia in the 1970s, recently retrieved from the pages of *RAIN* by Jonathan Benthall in *The Best of Anthropology Today* (2002). This episode was marked by the death of my interlocutor, Glynn Flood, whose transfiguration seems to have

underscored my own alliance with the devil.

17. I've been there and done that (*People and the State* 1978), which is why the persistent outpourings on this assail me with *déjà vu*. Perhaps the real story will be forced out only when one of us hits the wall with the velocity of David Mosse, whose exquisite account of the 'Anti-social anthropology' of his professional work (2006) is revelation far beyond the persnickety conventions of 'reflexivity'.

18. In their critique of 'globaloney' Petras and Veltmeyer (2001) explain their preference for the old-fashioned concept of *imperialism*, suggesting that there is much scope for ethnographic styles of study of 'an emerging class of transnational capitalists' (p.8).

19. Witness the 'New Institutional Economics' of the 80s-90s (e.g. Williamson 1985, Granovetter 1985).

20. The Darwinian revival has brought a radically different area of convergence for both disciplines: the market as a proving ground for 'adaptive fitness', and 'adaptive fitness' as the proving ground for cultural traits via an 'evolutionary psychology'. In the US this has driven 'neo-Darwinians' and the 'neo-Boasian relativists' in anthropology to discipline-cleaving extremes.

21. When my vulgarising instincts emerged very early in my career, I was warned very severely by my supervisors of the professional dangers of mixing anthropology and journalism.

22. My liberal economist colleagues like to remind me of my class complicity in these terms: I am a capital investor and depend on the rapacious corporations I demonise to pay my pension. These corporations justify their conduct in terms of responsibility to their shareholders (me), and shareholders usually justify their stakes in corporations in terms of vital family provisioning or pensioning needs (mine again). This is a good example of the sort of bio-cultural conjunction in public reasoning, which begs for closer analytical attention, perhaps from anthropologists.

23. I organised a symposium on this in 1978 (The Professions and the Universities, *Times Higher Education Supplement* nos. 331, 332, and 333, March 1978).

24. I am grateful to David Crawford for this nice perception.

25. If you have time on your hands, browse the following web sites:

Economic and Social Research Council -UK:

http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/ESRC_Re_Ethics_Frame_tcm6-11291.pdf

Association of Social Anthropologists - UK: <http://www.theasa.org/ethics.htm>

British Sociological Association: <http://www.britisoc.co.uk/> (click on link under 'Professional Standards')

Edinburgh University:

<http://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/admin/committees/research%20ethics%20policy%20and%20procedures.pdf>

University of California, Santa Barbara, Human Subjects research regulations:

<http://research.ucsb.edu/connect/pro/broch1.pdf>

26. *The Guardian* 20 July 2007.
27. Usually attributed to Edward, first Baron Thurlow, Lord Chancellor 1778-92.
28. See for example Lambsdorf (2007).
29. Robertson (2001).
30. See Dasgupta 1986.
31. The quote, of course, is from the late doyen of American cultural anthropology: 'Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning' (Geertz 1973: 5).
32. I am unnerved by the current *reductio ad absurdum* of culture-shock on TV: kill a cow, be initiated, and discover who you *really* are; spend a couple of weeks among the long-suffering *Ju/'hoansi* and discover what being an obese accountant in Colchester *really means*.
33. This is why I have little confidence in an anthropologist's *cultural* critique of anthropology – I'd rather have a philosopher like Ian Hacking (for example *The Social Construction of What?* (1999)) do the job for us.
34. I have a particular aversion to the chilling use of the word '*interrogate*' in critical commentary.