
According to common understanding of the terms, corruption and law are opposites. However, in *Corruption and the Secret of Law*, Monique Nuijten and Gerhard Anders present us with a totally different perspective and try to reveal the continuities between them. Through fine-grained ethnographic case studies dealing with corruption’s hidden connections with morality and the law of the nation-state, the book tries to shift our attention from the “rotten apples” to the barrel that contains them.

This edited book is divided into 4 parts with 9 chapters in total. Except the purely theoretical analysis in the first two chapters, the rest are case studies on corruption from Burundi, China, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico and the US, covering various fields such as political conflicts, social life, economic activities, criminal accusation, legal profession, border issues etc. Opening by discussion of the current prominence of corruption in academic literature and international policy circles, the introductory chapter argues for the significance of an anthropological perspective of corruption. “A perspective that does not conceptualize law and corruption as opposites allows us to investigate the moral and legal complexities pertaining to practices that are often simply dismissed as illegal” (p.2). From this angle, corruption is not conceived “as an individual act but as a phenomenon that is institutionalized and embedded in the wider matrix of power relations in society” (p.2).

Part one focuses on the properties of corruption and systematic corruption. Chapter 2 explains “the methodological challenges and ethical dilemmas involved in an anthropological study of phenomena such as corruption that are at the same time hidden and diffuse, concealed and openly discussed, justified and stigmatized in daily conversations” (p.27). It shows how the study of corruption can “improve our understanding of social and political issues such as local representations of citizenship and the state and its bureaucracies”, and “how norms and rules really work in different political and social settings” (pp.27-28). Chapter 3 presents an analysis of systemic corruption in Indonesia by showing that during the frequent political and economic crises of the young republic, parts of the administration increasingly relied on a parallel financial infrastructure drawing on illicitly acquired resources. It argues that systemic corruption should be understood as a constitutive element of a specific type of governance system.

Part two talks about the indeterminacy of the law and the legal profession. By focusing on the judgment of corruption and defenses against the charge, Chapter 4 reveals the interdependent relationship between law, corruption and moral rectitude. It particularly examines the relationship between gift giving and
bribery with references to five cases of pre-war Japan. We can see how the so-called “emotional indebtedness” to teachers, being regarded as socially accepted convention, challenges the law by asserting its contribution to social harmony. Chapter 5 offers a detailed analysis of criminal cases concentrated on the terms of the communication between the Italian defence lawyer and his clients within both the legal environment and the milieu of organized crime, with highlights on the pragmatic grounds underlying the major turning points in the defence strategy. The conclusion is that “corruption is illegal merely because it was designated as such by positive law and this definition loses its meaning beyond legal formalism” (p.119).

Part three discusses political aspects of corruption and corruption accusations. Chapter 6 explores how corruption narratives in Burundi are used to morally evaluate politics, arguing that such narratives reveal an intimate relationship between power and secrecy. Corruption is about covering up and using official means for unofficial purposes; it is perceived to be intrinsic to politics and the question in corruption narratives is not whether it exists but how well it is hidden behind the surface (p.140). Chapter 7 tells a story about a political struggle around a local Water User’s Association in western Mexico in which accusation of corruption played a prominent role. By pointing out that “corruption both unveils a public secret and mystifies the power of the state” (p.160), it suggests that the “secret of law” lies in the fact that the talk and imagination of corruption is deeply complicit with the workings of power (p.161).

Part four describes state officials in the twilight zone. The feature of Chapter 8 is the convincing analysis on the relation between guanxi (relationship, network, or connection) and corruption in market socialist China. It shows the authors’ insight and in-depth understanding of traditional Chinese culture and its impact on social activities in modern China. Practically, guanxi plays a crucial role in social interaction among Chinese people. But “guanxi has an ambiguous nature: it can either be presented as clearly morally better than corruption or as merging inseparably into it” (p.167). Guanxi practice allowed actors to construct social networks and build relationships of trust, which encouraged investment and facilitated the rise of small businesses, but also created a conductive environment for rent seeking, bribery, collusion, and exploitation (p.186). Its identical aspect with corruption is “the exchange of gifts and favors for instrumental purposes”. By exploring the role of tact as a crucial dimension in performing acceptable guanxi practice and avoiding labels of corruption, the book is especially helpful to those who do business with China. Chapter 9 examines corruption on the US side of the US-Mexico border and shows that individual acts of corruption occur within and are revealing of wider social process. It explains much beneath the surface of border culture and its relationship to corruption; exposes the tacit acceptance of illicit activity by the US and its hypocrisy on and across the border.