

Front cover caption (see back cover)

**JANINE R. WEDEL AND
GREGORY FELDMAN 1**

Why an anthropology of public policy?

MARYON MCDONALD 3

EU policy and destiny:

A challenge for anthropology

PNINA WERBNER 5

Islamophobia: Incitement to religious
hatred – legislating for a new fear?

MAGNUS MARSDEN 10

Muslim village intellectuals: The life of
the mind in northern Pakistan

JONATHAN BENTHALL 16

Confessional cousins and the rest: The
structure of Islamic toleration

KEITH HART 21

Letter from Europe: February 2005

COMMENT

Gregory Forth 22

Palaeoanthropology and local legends:
Homo floresiensis in the news

Brian Morris 22

Pre-university education: A response to
AT's special issue on education (20[6])

Siew-Peng Lee 23

Anthropology and Education: A
response to Brian Street (AT 20[6])

J. Guillemin, M. Schoch-Spana 23

Bioterrorism: A response to Monica
Schoch-Spana (AT 20[5])

LETTERS

D.P. Moody 24

Rethinking violence

Jean Besson and Nici Nelson 24

Applied anthropology at Goldsmiths

CONFERENCE

P.-J. Ezeh 24

Hope and impediments in African
anthropology

Max Carocci 25

Featuring myths, scripting reality

CALENDAR 26 NEWS 27 CLASSIFIED 28

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Anthropologists have long engaged in research that implicitly deals with public policy, for issues that pertain directly to policy lie at the heart of anthropology. These issues, as Shore and Wright (1997) observe, include institutions and power; interpretation and meaning; ideology, rhetoric and discourse; the politics of culture, ethnicity and identity; and interactions between the global and the local. Yet anthropology as a discipline has not given policy – a social, cultural and political construct – the explicit attention that it deserves.

This deficit should be redressed. In an ever more interconnected world, it is indisputable that public policy plays a pervasive, though often indirect or even elusive, role in shaping mass society. Policies may originate with governments, businesses, supranational entities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or private actors, or any combination of these. Increasingly central to the organization of contemporary societies, public policies connect disparate actors in complex power and resource relations; wittingly or not, these actors reproduce, resist or otherwise affect larger, non-localized regimes of power. Policy thus offers an ideal venue for examining the grounding of global processes.

Although several prominent anthropologists have called for greater attention to policy, the study of policy has yet to enter mainstream disciplinary practice. Many graduate students, recent PhDs and junior scholars who study policy find the anthropological validity of their work called into question not for compelling intellectual reasons, but rather on the grounds that the study of policy is the domain of other disciplines such as political science, economics, or sociology.¹ This argument, however, undercuts the notion that anthropology has a distinguishable theoretical contribution to make to the social sciences because it assumes that the only difference between disciplines is the chosen object of study (other disciplines study policy while anthropologists study rituals, for example). But anthropology offers distinctive contributions in how it constructs its object of study (e.g. policy as a fluid site of political contestation) in the multi-faceted ways that it studies that object (e.g. ethnography, the 'extended case method',² discourse analysis), and in the ways that it theorizes that object (e.g. the power relations and interactions of parties to a policy process). The development of a coherent body of research in the anthropology of public policy can make crucial contributions both to the discipline of anthropology and to the debates and field of public policy.

In terms of its contributions to anthropology, the study of policy has considerable potential to pioneer theoretical and methodological innovations in the discipline. A key reason is that it forces anthropologists to reconceptualize 'the field' as a site of ethnographic inquiry (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Studying policy makes it necessary to follow processes that connect actors, organizations and institutions and to ask how policy discourses help to sustain those connections even if the people involved are never in face-to-face contact. The changing nature of place also calls for discussion of how to conduct ethnographic research among loosely connected actors possessing varying levels of institutional leverage, and located in multiple sites. It calls for greater use of a wide range of ethnographic methods – of which participant-observation is but one – that enable the field to be conceived in terms of power and resource relations

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rather than geographically bounded place (Gupta and Ferguson 1997) and that can facilitate entry to difficult-to-access 'fields'.

'Studying through', the process of following the source of a policy – its discourses, prescriptions and programmes – through to those affected by the policies (be they a community, company, social network, 'clan', general public or other entity) provides a promising framework for examining policy processes. By charting connections among actors who may not know each other but are situated among the interactive levels through which policy processes are diffused, 'studying through' can illuminate how different organizational and everyday worlds are interconnected across time and space.

A focus on public policies, especially those that are promulgated widely by international organizations, supranational entities and powerful governments, can provide a basis for anthropologists from different countries and continents to connect with each other around topics of mutual interest and concern. For example, anthropologists studying the impacts of international development or trade policies (or pertinent aspects of 'globalization') in Latin America may find important comparative dimensions in discussions with those working on the impacts of similar policies in Africa, Asia or the former Soviet Union. Similarly, anthropologists studying the contracting out of traditional government responsibilities in the United States may find common ground with those concerned with privatization in other contexts.

The anthropological study of public policy can also bring important insights to policy debates, as well as to the fields of public policy, public administration and 'policy science', among others. Anthropological scholarship distinguishes itself from other academic disciplines studying public policy issues in two critical ways.

First, the anthropology of policy takes public policy itself as an object of analysis, rather than as the unquestioned premise of a research agenda. Anthropologists can explain how taken-for-granted assumptions channel policy debates in certain directions, inform the dominant ways policy problems are identified, enable particular classifications of target groups, and legitimize certain policy solutions while marginalizing others. Anthropology is ideally suited to explore the cultural and philosophical underpinnings of policy – its enabling discourses, mobilizing metaphors and underlying ideologies and uses. In short, anthropologists can destabilize the assumptions and conceptual metaphors that underpin the formulation of policy problems and thereby help create room for alternative policy options.

Second, anthropology is equipped to challenge approaches that dominate public policy discourse, including economic models. Public policy, like foreign aid, is often thought of as a 'conveyor belt' transmitting resources or advice from one side to another. But aid policies may appear more like a series of chemical reactions that begin with the donor's policies, but are transformed by the agendas, interests and interactions of the donor and recipient representatives at each stage of implementation and interface. Many parties become involved in the process, and the result is often qualitatively different from the plan envisioned by the supposed policymakers/donors.

Today, policy decisions and their implementation cannot be adequately mapped using variables whose values and correlations are pre-specified by an abstract model rather than situated in an ethnographic context. Although anthropology itself is not entirely free from universalizing concepts, its reliance on ethnography to help construct the variables being studied and map their relationships is crucial in a rapidly changing world. Policy-making and implementation hardly follow a linear process

with a predetermined outcome. On the contrary, policy processes often encounter unforeseen variables, which are frequently combined in unforeseen ways and with unforeseen consequences. Anthropologists are able to take on the complexity, ambiguity and messiness of policy processes. By focusing on players more than policies, and on the interactions in which parties to the policy process engage (whether or not they engage willingly or wittingly, or even see themselves as 'parties'), anthropological analysis can disentangle the outcomes and help explain how and why they often contradict the stated intentions of policy-makers.

Of particular value is a social organizational approach that explores how actors and organizations are interconnected and illuminates the structures and processes that ground, order and give policies direction. For example, social network analysis, which focuses on social relations rather than the characteristics of actors, can provide a snapshot of the workings of transnational policy processes. Network analysis highlights the relationships among individuals, groups and organizations, as well as the changing, overlapping and multiple roles that actors within them may play. Analysing networks enables an ethnographer to see different levels (e.g. state and private, or local, regional, national and international) in one frame of study and to observe how they are interwoven. It allows the ethnographer to explore the interactions between public policy and private interests and the mixing of state, non-governmental and business networks that is becoming increasingly prevalent around the world.

Such analysis can serve as a persuasive basis for explaining policy decisions. One suitable topic would be how long-connected players make up 'flex groups', whose skill at manoeuvring between government and private roles, at relaxing both the government's rules of accountability and businesses' codes of competition, and at conflating state and private interests, enables the group to exert extraordinary influence over policy. In the US, for example, a particular 'flex group' has played a pivotal role in shaping US policy toward the Middle East and taking the United States to war in Iraq.

Bringing social anthropological analysis to public policy can help counteract two related and dominant trends. The first of these is the domination of public policy and debate, and even scholarship, by ideologized discourses of globalization, privatization and democratization. The second is the use of flawed dichotomous frameworks (e.g. 'state' versus 'private', 'macro' versus 'micro', 'top-down' versus 'bottom-up' and 'centralized' versus 'decentralized') prevalent in public policy, political, science, and other fields. These frameworks tend to obfuscate, rather than shed light on, the workings of policy processes.

An anthropology of public policy should not only add to the body of substantive knowledge about the way the world is changing and provide a critical corrective to the simplified models that work well in journals and textbooks but often fail to produce desired outcomes on the ground. It should spur theoretical and methodological development that strengthens both anthropology and the interdisciplinary study of policy. ●

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1. We have co-founded the Interest Group for the Anthropology of Public Policy (IGAPP), which is affiliated with the American Anthropological Association, to provide an institutional framework to identify and foster the work of anthropologists studying policy. IGAPP's initial projects include compiling existing anthropological studies of policy discourses, processes and impacts, and developing curricula and syllabuses. We welcome the input of readers in these efforts, which we believe are a crucial first step toward strengthening the contributions of the anthropology of public policy to the discipline and to interdisciplinary theory on policy. Please send ideas and bibliographic references to: gfel@interchange.ubc.ca and jwedel@gmu.edu

2. See van Velsen (1967).

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