

## **‘Understanding Power and Politics: The Continuing Relevance of the Anthropology of Policy’**

Cris Shore and Susan Wright

### **1: How do you see the state of the art today for the anthropology of policy, more than 25 years after your pathbreaking book, *Anthropology of Policy: Critical Perspectives on Governance and Power*?**

Twenty-five years ago the ‘anthropology of policy’ did not exist as a subject or sub-field of social anthropology. While policy was everywhere shaping the structure and fabric of contemporary societies and influencing people’s lives and livelihoods - ‘from the cradle to the grave’, as we wrote in our introduction (Shore and Wright 1997: 4) - it remained curiously invisible as an organising principle and social force. Even within anthropology – a discipline usually acutely attuned to recognising the cultural processes that underpin institutions and drive events -- policy represented a blind spot: an unnamed and unrecognised phenomenon invisible in plain sight or only through its effects. One of the achievements of our 1997 edited book was to bring policy out into the open. We did that first by ‘naming’ it, and then by tracking its genealogies and trajectories. We also showed how an ‘anthropology’ of policy differed from the more positivistic approaches of Policy Studies, while highlighting its affinities with work on street-level bureaucrats and Interpretive Policy Analysis. The net effect was to put policy firmly on the agenda as a subject of ethnographic scrutiny and an object (or process), both for anthropological analysis and for the political and social sciences (Wedel et al 2005).

It is important to recall the context in which that book was written. The 1990s was a period of rapid social change where the structures of the welfare state and the neo-Keynesian economic consensus that underpinned it were fast being dismantled and replaced by the rationality of the market and neoliberal thinking. Our book both showed how politicians, particularly in the UK, Europe and the US, reformed individual sectors (for example, health, childcare, housing and education) and how the way those policies worked provided a window onto wider transformations of governance and the emergence of new forms of power. The contributing chapters provided vivid case studies of the neoliberalisation of economy and society in different countries and contexts.

Our later book, *Policy Worlds*, published almost a decade-and-a-half later, continued the analysis of those processes of neoliberalisation, their spread and metamorphosis in other contexts (Shore, Wright and Però 2011). It was also a response to theoretical criticisms of the way we had used Foucault and questions about how we conceptualised people's agency and capacity to engage with and shape policy. While policies may 'hail' or interpolate individuals into particular subject positions, we questioned whether people adopted this 'subjectification' and in what circumstances they modified, contested or resisted the way they were called upon to be and behave as citizens, clients, students, workers and professionals. As many of the chapters showed, the 2010s was the apogee of a particular form of neoliberal governmentality in many countries across Europe and the US. It was also a period when policy became the instrument of choice for international agencies such as the IMF and World Bank in promoting their vision for a more globalised neoliberal economy and world order. However, as Foucault had long noted, the art of liberal government - or governmentality - operated primarily through mobilising the agency of individuals and securing their active participation in its projects. This process of individualisation and totalisation worked by aligning individual subjectivity to the goals of the organisation. The chapters in the 2011 book paid particular attention to the fact that individuals still found considerable room for manoeuvre; if not 'spaces for resistance', then at least spaces within the policy process that allowed actors some autonomy and creativity in how they delivered the specified goals of the policy.

It is possible that the 2020s represent a further period of change in neoliberal governance, one characterised in some countries, like Denmark, by the closing of those spaces for the exercising individual agency. Yet in other contexts, notably the America of Donald Trump and the Britain of Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak, the era seems to be defined by a lack of coherence in governance and more chaotic policy narratives fuelled by populism and an outright rejection of established sources of authoritative expertise. These contemporary changes in forms of governance will be explored in more depth by Susan Hyatt and Ted Power who are editing the next collection of essays on the anthropology of policy.

The Anthropology of Policy has not only grown in terms of its theory and methodology, but also in terms of its institutional presence. Under the auspices of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), in 2008 Janine Wedel, Gregory Feldman, William Beeman and others spearheaded the creation of an Interest Group for the Anthropology of

Public Policy (IGAPP). This organisation grew rapidly and by 2012 had over 1700 members. Such was its success that in 2013 the leadership of the AAA invited us to form a new Section. Called the Association for the Anthropology of Policy (ASAP), this became one of the fastest growing sections of the AAA. Also in 2013, Stanford University Press invited us (Cris Shore and Sue Wright) to create and edit a new book series entitled (unsurprisingly) 'Anthropology of Policy'. The primary aim of the series is to develop new methodologies, perspectives and approaches to the study of policy in an ever-widening range of sectors and ever-changing world. In order to foster communication between anthropological research and policy communities, we ask each author to highlight in a final chapter the key insights that policy professionals can gain from their anthropological analysis. The series now has 12 volumes covering a wide range of different topics and countries (more on this below), with others in the pipeline.

**2: What are some of the areas in the anthropology of policy that you find have a particularly exciting potential and why? (You could also include mention of your latest projects here)**

Despite its evident dynamism and success, the anthropology of policy is still an under-developed and often invisible sub-field. Outside of a group of critical scholars (mostly concerned with organisations, power, governance and language), its scope and potential are not often appreciated or recognised. That means it has enormous potential for development as a new generation of anthropologists encounter new policy worlds that call out for investigation and analysis.

We believe it has enormous capacity to contribute innovative insights and critical perspectives in the future. The books published in the Stanford UP series illustrate this and highlight the diversity of issues that the Anthropology of Policy has brought into focus. These include

- *Drugs, Thugs, and Diplomats* by Winifred Tate, which examines the contradictory logics of US anti-drugs policy in Latin America

- *The Orderly Entrepreneur* by Catherine Honeyman, which analyses the surprising twists in a project to engineer social change through entrepreneurship education in Rwanda
- *Navigating Austerity* by Laura Bear, which explores how low bureaucrats, entrepreneurs and workers navigate austerity policies, the toxic legacies of debt and privatisation on the Hooghly River in India
- *Coercive Concern* by Riva Jaffe-Walter, which highlights the paradoxically coercive effects of progressive liberalism in the education of migrant children in Denmark
- *Fragile Elite* by Susanne Bregnbæk, which provides a novel understanding of the extraordinarily high suicide rate among students in China's elite universities
- *One Blue Child* by Susanna Trnka, which traces the emergence of 'self-management' as a technology for addressing health problems in the Czech Republic and New Zealand
- *Law-Mart* by Riaz Tejani, which provides a powerful exposé of the corrosive effects and implications of the rise of for-profit law schools in the United States
- *The Gray Zone* by Gregory Feldman, which investigates the work of undercover police teams trying to tackle smuggling rings on the EU's borders
- *Wild Policy* by Tess Lea, which provides a fascinating history of failed state policies aimed at addressing the Aboriginal 'problem' in Australia
- *Village Gone Viral* by Marit Tolo Østerbø, which critically analyses how a village in Ethiopia became a policy model that took off internationally.
- *Antinuclear Citizens* by Akihiro Ogawa, which examines how grassroots activists reimagine Japan and navigate with policy makers after the nuclear power disaster in Fukushima
- *The Alternative University* by Mariya Ivancheva, which examines how, through contradictory and quixotic policies, the vanguard higher education reform of the Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV) was turned into a lived reality

These books provide a wonderful road map of the scope and possibility of an Anthropology of Policy. There are also many other important books that open up critical insights into policy worlds. These include David Mosse's (2005) ethnography of development aid policy in India, Hugh Gusterson and Catherine Lutz's analysis of militarism in the US, Janine Wedel's (2011) work on the shadowy world of Washington elites, Carole Greenhalg's (2008) analysis

of China's one-child policy, John Clarke and Dave Benton's (2005) examination of policy travel, and Gillian Tett's (2009) investigation of the shadowy world of bankers in the credit derivatives market.

There are many other policy fields that need investigating: climate change and environmental policies in the wake of the current climate emergency; defence and security policies in an increasingly unstable geo-political world; policing and institutional racism; the uses of AI and its implications for knowledge, power and democracy; policy regimes aimed at imposing regulation and compliance in the world of finance; anti-corruption policies; and of course, the complex lives of immigration and asylum policies.

In terms of our own recent work, our forthcoming book *Audit Culture: How Indicators and Rankings are Changing the World* (2024) uses many of the techniques outlined in the 1997 and 2011 books to analyse the ways in which the logics of accountancy and finance have been taken up and used as instruments of governance in the management of contemporary organisations and societies. One of the main arguments of the book is that 'audit' – a set of calculative techniques and practices designed to ensure the financial probity of a company or organisation and garner confidence and public trust – has not only become a dominant organising principle of society but also a mechanism for promoting the financialisation, capture and ultimately privatisation of public assets. In this respect, the seemingly neutral and a-political rationalities of audit and accounting have become instruments for actively fuelling processes of outsourcing, asset stripping and accumulation through dispossession.

*Enacting the University: Danish University Reform in an Ethnographic Perspective* (Wright et al 2020) is another text that exemplifies how the anthropology of policy can be used to explore the way universities are transformed through processes of contestation and congeries of actions across different scales and through time.

**3: Steven Sampson has recently argued (also in this issue) that the anthropology of policy risks getting delimited by an all-embracing unboundedness. Do you agree? Can we say that the object of an anthropology of policy has some hallmarks of specificity? Or, approaching the question from a different point of view: seeing as the objects of an anthropology of policy's study can overlap with other subdisciplines, what do you think is the added value that an anthropology of policy brings?**

The assumption in this question is that the anthropology of policy should somehow be bounded and contained otherwise it will lose its coherence, become amorphous and indistinct. This argument has echoes of the debates that occurred several decades ago within American anthropology over whether we should abandon 'culture' concept as it had become so broad and all-encompassing it had lost its meaning and value as an analytical concept (Fox and King 2002). We don't see this as a danger for the anthropology of policy.

The added value of an anthropology of policy is that it draws attention to the politics behind any particular policy initiative or regime. Engaging with the worlds of policy and policy making opens up new ways of thinking and seeing that are inherently critical and reflexive. Policy, as we have stated, is a *process* and an unfinished one at that. The power of an anthropology of policy is that it provides a lens for examining large-scale transformations in systems of governance and in the operation of power. It works in two directions: the first analyses what policy *is* (a plan, project, model, vision and legitimating narrative etc) and the second examines what policy *does* (i.e. its material or intangible effects and the processes and subjectivities it hails into being). The anthropologist of policy then traces the connections that make up the policy process. In other words, we use policy as a window onto wider processes of politics, power and governance.

In answer to Steven Sampson's question, it is not about *boundaries* but about *focus*. An anthropology of policy is not defined or delimited by its content or its subject matter. Rather, it offers an analytical perspective, one that allows us to probe some of the deeper and wider social and political processes and macro-level ordering principles at work behind people's everyday worlds. It gives us a way to see and understand the larger picture; how small places connect with large issues, as Thomas Eriksen (2015) put it.

The fact that the objects of an anthropology of policy may overlap with other disciplines is not a problem for us. Of course they do. Anthropology typically draws its strengths and insights from a vast range of disciplines: economics, politics, legal studies, philosophy, linguistics, literary criticism, organizational studies, STS, sociological theory and more. As a discipline it is inherently interdisciplinary, eclectic and intellectually omnivorous. But anthropology does not simply 'overlap' with other disciplines; we *engage* with them.

The important thing to stress here is that the Anthropology of Policy is not defined by its subject matter; rather, as noted earlier, it is also a methodology and an approach – one that starts by problematising the language of policy and the meaning of key concepts. It then proceeds into an analysis of the rationalities that shape policy narratives and how these are cloaked in administrative and seemingly neutral procedures that nevertheless invite individuals and populations to conceive of themselves and organise themselves in particular ways. These are techniques for imposing order on society that imbricate people, sometimes unknowingly, sometimes willingly, and sometimes resisting into systems of power and rationalities of government.

In short, the Anthropology of Policy is fundamentally concerned with politics, power, the ordering principles behind different forms of organisation. It is concerned with both the concepts and practices used to shape organisations and societies and the ways individuals, groups and organisations engage with them. As we argued in our books, once created, policies have a life of their own that often escapes the intentions of their creators: they become agents - or ‘actants’ in the Actor Network Theory sense - that produce unanticipated and often perverse effects. A classic example of this is the influential ‘Essay on the Principle of Population’ published in 1798 by the English economist Thomas Malthus. This argued that population growth would inevitably outstrip agricultural production and that famine was therefore nature’s answer to overpopulation - ideas that were later used to support British colonial policies and government inaction during the Irish famine of the 1840s. Another example of the way policies often produce perverse or contradictory effects was the Italian government’s initiative during the 1950s and 1960 for relocating mafia gang members from the south of Italy to the north. Under the 1955 *confino* plan (or law n. 14223), some 3,000 suspected criminals for whom the prosecutors lacked sufficient evidence to send to prison were forcibly transferred to the more-law-abiding north. The assumption was that *mafiosi* were a product of backward and low-trust societies and could therefore be redeemed by sending them to live for a few years in high-trust, law-abiding and ‘social capital rich’ areas where they would be integrated into a mafia-free culture. However, that policy often had the opposite effect as these individuals acted as seeds for diffusing and transplanting organized crime into hitherto mafia-free areas (Buonanno and Pazzona 2014).

One does not need to look far to find other examples of the disjuncture between policy intentions and policy implementation, or what happens when policymakers attempt to

translate their visions into law and practice. The idea, therefore, that the anthropology of policy might become so expansive that it risks exhausting its analytical potential misses the point that it is both a *methodology* and an object or field of research. And that field is itself constantly changing, just as the power relations and systems of governance it studies are themselves continuously in motion.

**Do you think that the anthropology of policy is threatened by the current political climate, in which we see the rise of right-wing governments and authoritarianism in a number of places around the globe? I.e., is it becoming more difficult to do this kind of critical research, whether in terms of obtaining funding, permission/access, or in terms of dissemination, or teaching in the (neoliberal) university environment that you and Sue have studied so well?**

The anthropology of policy hails from a tradition in anthropology that is critical, reflexive and oriented towards questions of politics, power and governance. In that respect it has been regarded as uncomfortable and threatening, particularly by those powerful groups who prefer to operate in the dark and who dislike any kind of external scrutiny. This is particularly the case when the anthropological gaze is directed closer to home. Perhaps the threatening political climate makes it most difficult for our own university sector and our own institutions to accept, let alone support, critical analysis.

Is it becoming more difficult to do this kind of critical research? Yes it is. Even in the period of the 1970s to the 2000s, it was never easy for anthropologists to turn the discipline's critical gaze onto the rich and powerful - not least because the rich and powerful are intensely private and far more adept at controlling the way they are represented. They are also usually able to block inquisitive outsiders - or those they don't like - from gaining access to their inner worlds. This has long been recognised as a problem for the anthropology of elites (Shore and Nugent 2002). That said, many anthropologists have managed to successfully access the inner worlds of secretive or reclusive elites, including Janine Wedel (2009) who studied the 'shadow elite' on Capitol Hill, Hugh Gusterson (1996) who studied nuclear weapons scientists in Los Alamos, Lilith Mahmud (2014) who studied freemasonry in Italy, and Rosita Armytage (2018), who conducted fieldwork among powerful political families in Lahore, Pakistan. While these ethnographies all showcase different ways of 'studying up', they were



all carried out by ‘outsider’ anthropologists who were not part of the elite communities they studied.

The anthropology of policy and studying up become more problematic when it concerns fieldwork in one’s own backyard. Doing critical ethnographic research on one’s own institution can be extremely difficult, as we have both discovered. Powerful organizations tend to be highly risk-averse, and none likes to have its ‘dirty laundry’ displayed in public. When the rector at Wright’s university denounced some of her research in public, the academic union asked how he fulfilled his role of protecting her research freedom. His (threatening) reply was, ‘The researcher behind the report has absolutely no problem with her employment as a result of this case’ (Wright et al. 2020: 321-2). At this time four other senior professors in Denmark (all women) were also in conflict with management about the principles underpinning the university – protection of research freedom, freedom to teach, and freedom to enter into public debate. Even where a union successfully defended the academics concerned, three were so affected by the conflict, they had to resign or even leave the country (Wright 2016). In the UK, getting approval from a university’s ethics committee to study one’s own university can be extremely difficult, and many critical scholars have found themselves facing censure or sanctions when trying to write about the inner workings of their organisations. For example, as a condition for receiving a Voluntary Severance package from his university, Shore was obliged to sign a form of Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) containing a gagging clause that prohibits him from using any information relating to the university that came into his possession by virtue of being employed there that management could reasonably regard as ‘confidential’. Confidentiality in this context usually refers to commercially sensitive or legal matters, but the wording is intentionally vague and menacing. This practice of using non-disclosure agreements as a managerial tool to silence dissidents or would-be whistleblowers has become increasingly prevalent in many universities today (Geoghegan 2021). Equally challenging for an anthropology of the university – and for academic freedom - is the practice of using the university’s ethics approval apparatus to prevent researchers from studying their own institutions (Shore 2018).

Research and teaching in the neoliberal university are increasingly shaped by considerations of money making, marketing, reputation and branding. This affects scholars’ and students’ academic freedom, defined by UNESCO as ‘pursuit of truth, without regard for ideology, identity, or authority, bounded only by the standards of professional and social

responsibility'.<sup>1</sup> At the moment, the distance between management and academics means that there is still some space to exercise *Lehrfreiheit* or the freedom to teach as one sees fit, even if tight controls over the curriculum and assessment restrict students' *Lernfreiheit*. Wright determinedly uses this freedom to teach to try and equip anthropology students with the reflexive and critical skills to analyse and actively shape organisations - whether their university or places of employment – to make them more conducive to their learning aims or to fulfilling their values in working life. This freedom to teach is increasingly constrained by the growing presence – and power - of management and senior administrators, which is hastening the demise of the professoriat and its autonomy. They now pose a serious threat to academic freedom and to the ability of researchers to perform their public duty as critic and conscience of society.

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO, Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel, adopted by the General Conference at its twenty-ninth session, Paris, 21 October–12 November 1997, 11 November 1997, para. 27.

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