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# Toward an Anthropology of Public Policy

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As the rational choice model of “policy” proliferates in “policy studies,” the social sciences, modern governments, organizations, and everyday life, a number of anthropologists are beginning to develop a body of work in the anthropology of public policy that critiques the assumptions of “policy” as a legal-rational way of getting things done. While de-masking the framing of public policy questions, an anthropological approach attempts to uncover the constellations of actors, activities, and influences that shape policy decisions, their implementation, and their results. In a rapidly changing world, anthropologists’ empirical and ethnographic methods can show how policies actively create new categories of individuals to be governed. They also suggest that the long-established frameworks of “state” and “private,” “local” or “national” and “global,” “macro” and “micro,” “top down” and “bottom up,” and “centralized” and “decentralized” not only fail to capture current dynamics in the world but actually obfuscate the understanding of many policy processes.

*Keywords:* anthropology of public policy; studying through; globalization; ethnographic methods; social network analysis; ethics codes

Anthropologists have been 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) observed, include institutions and power; interpretation and

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meaning; ideology, rhetoric, and discourse; the politics of culture, ethnicity and identity; and interactions between the global and the local. In an ever-more interconnected world, public policies, whether originating with governments, businesses, supranational entities, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), private actors, or some combination of these, are increasingly central to the organization of society. Public policies connect disparate actors in complex power and resource relations and play a pervasive, though often indirect, role in shaping society. Anthropologists studying globalization, the state, politics, development, and elites, among other topics, are discovering the centrality of policy to their research, and a body of work in the anthropology of policy is developing.<sup>1</sup> Although some anthropologists who study policy become involved in public debates or advocacy, and several movements in anthropology encourage activism, the anthropology of public policy is devoted to research into policy issues and processes and the critical analysis of those processes.<sup>2</sup>

## Legacy of Anthropological Research on Policy Issues

Anthropologists of American, British, and other traditions have long recognized the intertwining of anthropological topics with policy. In the United States, for example, early debates among Franz Boas and other prominent anthropologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries over evolutionary theory went to the core of public policies dealing with race and gender (Stocking 1968; Smedley 1993). At issue was whether “race” and “gender” are biological or social and whether they are fixed or changing. Some anthropologists, such as Louis Henry Morgan and Edward Tylor, assumed in their comparative studies of kinship and other institutions that human cultures (often corresponding with nineteenth-century Western notions of “biological races”) developed through a series of evolutionary stages, from “savagery” to “civilization.” Other scholars, such as Boas, challenged these assumptions. For example, Boas’s studies of immigrants, conducted at the behest of the United States Immigration Commission, demonstrated that “race” is a changing, social construct and that physical differences between “races” are variable and depend on context.

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*Susan Wright, Anthropology of Policy: Critical Perspectives on Governance and Power and, more recently, with Dieter Haller, Corruption: Anthropological Perspectives (Pluto Press, 2005).*

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Across the Atlantic, the work of British anthropologists was just as, if not more, interconnected with policy. In *The Sorcerer's Apprentice: An Anthropology of Public Policy* (1976), Cyril Belshaw, who entered an anthropology program at the London School of Economics in the 1940s after a stint as a colonial administrator in Oceania, argued in reality that anthropology has always studied, albeit maybe not self-consciously, policy. Given that the discipline developed alongside colonialism, it has in many ways studied the effects of those colonial processes on social groups and organizations. Many British social anthropologists, such as Edward E. Evans-Pritchard and Max Gluckman, and those trained in this tradition, such as Raymond Firth and Frederik Barth, have studied how social institutions and social policies are organized, function, and change and the way these influence social actors, social boundaries, and the construction of social identities. Belshaw argued that anthropologists should look at social interactions, exchanges, and processes, such as nationalism and development, from the ground up, in relation to colonialism and those in power; he suggested that in understanding these relationships and messy processes, we can glimpse the way in which men and women create society. As he summed it up, "In an ultimate sense, society is itself policy making" (p. xv).

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Since the publication of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, many scholars have pointed out limitations in anthropology, limitations that are the result of its intimate ties to colonialism, as well as possible new directions for the field. Postcolonialists—those who study the social, political, economic, and cultural practices that have emerged in response and resistance to colonialism—suggest that anthropologists' "critiques" of cultural practices, including policy processes, are partially influenced by their particular social position(s) (Marcus and Fisher 1986; Fisher 2003).

Today, many anthropologists study contemporary global processes and how global, transnational entities interact with states, nations, and local groups. There are those who study militarism and national security policies in the United States (Lutz 2002, 2005), Europe (Feldman 2003), Latin America (Gill 2004), and the Middle East (Bornstein 2001). Others study donor politics, foreign and domestic aid (Wedel 2001), research funding (Brenneis 1999), and tensions between anthropologists and human rights lawyers and journalists (Merry 2003). These anthropol-

ogists build on a longtime development in the field. Some thirty years ago, Nader (1974, 1980) appealed to the discipline to “study up”—that is, to analyze powerful institutions and elites of complex societies—as an antidote to the traditional focus on poor, colonized, and marginalized peoples. “A reinvented anthropology,” Nader wrote, “should study powerful institutions and bureaucratic organizations in the United States, for such institutions and their network systems affect our lives and also affect the lives of people that anthropologists have traditionally studied all around the world” (1974, 292-93). Wolf (1974, 261) similarly urged anthropologists to “spell out the processes of power which created the present-day cultural systems and the linkages between them.” Other notable works heeding these calls include Marcus’s (1992) study of dynastic-business families in late-twentieth-century America and Gusterson’s (1996, 1999) study of nuclear engineers in a weapons laboratory at the end of the cold war. There are also those, like Marietta Baba (2000, 38-39), who argue anthropologists must begin studying professional institutions and organizations, such as medical, legal, industrial, and educational ones, which are “rapidly becoming the most powerful forces shaping the human condition now and the future.”

While the “powerful institutions” about which Nader wrote are even more so today, anthropologists studying globalization and connected subjects have tended to focus on how global processes affect local communities. Appadurai’s (1996) important treatment of globalization from the angle of actors who are profoundly affected by global processes is a case in point. Relatively little anthropological work has been done to explore how social organization and networks organize transnational players and policy processes, global elites, decision makers, and those who influence decisions. Two recent exceptions, however, are Catherine Lutz’s (2005) and Lesley Gill’s (2004) research on militarism. Lutz is currently conducting ethnographic research into the role of the U.S. military in the Asia-Pacific region and resulting responses to U.S. military bases by local and transnationally linked social movements. Her study includes interviews about military bases with local activists, base neighbors, and U.S. military and diplomatic personnel. Similarly, Gill’s study of the School of Americas (SOA) included interviews of U.S. Army officers and the Latin Americanists who trained at the school, anti-SOA activists, and Andean coca-growing peasants who were often targeted by security forces during the “War on Drugs.”

## What Public Policy Is and How Policy Questions Are Framed

The starting point of an anthropological approach to public policy is to examine the assumptions and framing of policy debates (see the appendix for a case study of such an approach). Policies arise out of particular contexts and in many ways “encapsulate the entire history and culture of the society that generated them,” as Shore and Wright (1997, 7) expressed it. While policies may be clothed in neutral

language—their ostensible purpose merely to promote efficiency or effectiveness—they are fundamentally political. In fact, “a key feature of modern power,” Shore and Wright contended, is the “masking of the political under the cloak of neutrality” (pp. 8-9).

The anthropology of policy takes public policy itself as an object of analysis, rather than as the unquestioned premise of a research agenda. Anthropology is well suited to explore the cultural and philosophical underpinnings of policy—its enabling discourses, mobilizing metaphors, and underlying ideologies and uses. 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.

### *Key questions for an anthropology of policy*

An anthropology of policy is not simply concerned with representing local, indigenous, or marginalized “cultures” to policy makers, government agencies, or concerned NGOs. Its focus instead is simultaneously wider and narrower: wider insofar as its aim is to explore how the state (or to be more exact, those policy makers and professionals who are authorized to act in the state’s name) relates to local populations; and narrower to the extent that its ethnographic focus tends to privilege the goal of understanding how state policies and government processes are experienced and interpreted by people at the local level, keeping in mind that anthropologists are recasting the “local” or the “community”<sup>3</sup> to capture changing realities. Comaroff and Comaroff (1999, 294), for example, stressed that “‘Locality’ is not everywhere, nor for every purpose, the same thing; sometimes it is a family, sometimes a town, a nation, sometimes a flow or a field, sometimes a continent or even the world; often it lies at the point of articulation among two or more of these things.”

An anthropology of policy, however, is equally interested in understanding the cultures and worldviews of those policy professionals and decision makers who seek to implement and maintain their particular vision of the world through their policies and decisions. From an anthropological perspective, what happens in the executive boardroom, the cabinet meeting, or the shareholders’ annual general meeting is no less important than that which occurs at the level of the factory floor or locality. Thus, an anthropological approach to the study of policy incorporates the full realm of processes and relations involved in the production of policy: from the policy makers and their strategic initiatives to the locals who invariably shape and mediate policy while translating and implementing it into action. In this vein, an anthropology of policy asks the following:

- What exactly is “policy?”
- How should we conceptualize policy processes that tend to create particular “policy communities,” that is, specific constellations of actors, activities, and influences that shape policy?

- What role do policies play in the fashioning of modern subjects and subjectivities? In other words, how do policies shape a community's ideas about human beings and being human?
- How useful is it to view policy as a "political technology," or viewing policy through a state's administrative rules, laws, and judicial rulings? Is it useful to view policy as a "technique of the self" or a meaningful projection of a community's understanding of itself, others, and the world? And what are the limits to awareness given the particular constraints imposed by governing bodies? (Foucault 1977; Rabinow 1984; Rose 1990, 1999).
- Finally, how can we study policy processes anthropologically, and what is distinctive about an anthropologically informed set of perspectives?

### *What is "policy"?*

Policy is an anthropologically interesting word. Despite its frequency of use, there is still little agreement on an authoritative definition of policy. However, an anthropology of policy is less concerned with assigning abstract and immutable definitions of the term "policy" than with understanding how policy functions in the shaping of society. In other words, the key question is not "What is policy?" but rather, "What do people do in the name of policy?" An etymology of the term "policy" itself helps to expose some of its social functions. The word is commonly used as a shorthand for a field of activity (for example, "economic policy" or "foreign policy"), for a specific proposal (for example, the EU's Health and Safety at Work directive), or a piece of government legislation. Elsewhere, it is used to describe a general program or desired state of affairs or, alternatively, as a label to describe outcomes or what governments actually achieve. These uses are consistent with what has become the standard modern sense of the term understood as a "course of action adopted and pursued by a government, party, ruler, statesmen etc," or any course of action adopted as expedient.<sup>4</sup> From an anthropological reading, this definition has notable similarities to that of "myth" in the Malinowskian sense of a "charter for action" (Malinowski 1926) or a charter conveying assumptions, values, and meanings about how to live.

However, the historical semantics of the term "policy" also reveal other, equally important clusters of meaning that shed light on other aspects of the concept. What is particularly interesting about the medieval French origins of the word "policy" in the sense of governing and management are its close semantic associations with "policing" (*policie*) and "polishing." Although now obsolete, the sixteenth-century use of policy as a verb meaning to police or, more precisely, "to organize and regulate the internal order of," is suggestive of what are, perhaps, some of the less conspicuous but no less unimportant functions. This centuries-old definition bears an uncanny resemblance to the critical angle that many anthropologists now favor in their studies of the modern state. A key part of this research is to draw out how policy aids the state in shaping, controlling, and regulating heterogeneous populations through classificatory schemes that homogenize diversity, render the subject transparent to the state, and implement legal and spatial boundaries between different categories of subjects (cf. Trouillot 2001). Similarly, when used as an adjective to describe "elegancy," "refinement," "culture," and "civilization" or, more precisely, the "polishing or refining of manners," the older sense of the term "policy"

might also find its modern counterpart in the idea of policy as “spin” and as a verbal sound bite designed to strike the right note among electors. The sense of policy as a “contract of insurance” or “daily lottery,” stemming from the Greek “demonstrate” (*apodeiknynai*) and “proof” (*apodeixis*), might also resonate with ideas about “accountability” and “transparency” or that governing bodies are accountable to their citizens, members, or investors and obligated to communicate their activities and decisions to them.

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But even more significant are the associations of the term “policy” with two rival sets of meaning and the way these have shifted over the centuries. In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English, “policy” was commonly used as a noun for political sagacity, prudence, or skill in the execution of statecraft. However, during the same period, it was also used as an adjective to describe types of conduct that were both good and bad. On one hand, policy evoked the idea of “diplomacy,” “prudence,” and “expediency,” but in its bad sense, it also meant “shrewdness,” “cunning,” “craftiness,” and “dissimulation.” Again, these two alternative readings would also seem to be salient for understanding contemporary uses and meanings of the word “policy.” When these two meanings are put together, they show how statecraft, which is invariably concerned with consolidating social order, inherently privileges some people over others without revealing the fact that it is producing an order of inequality; policy must be “bad” to achieve the “good” of a stable state. The important point to deduce from this brief exercise in historical semantics is that the word “policy” is a concept laden with often quite contradictory meanings; it is a word that can be coded and decoded to convey very ambiguous messages.

### *The proliferation of “policy” in everyday discourse*

The term “policy” now frequently appears both in the language of elites and in everyday life. The word seems to have become ubiquitous in the discourse of governments and organizations, particularly in the way these bodies represent themselves, define their goals, or justify their *raison d’être*. “Policy” has become the leitmotif of modern organizations. As Shore and Wright (1997) argued, policy has



become an increasingly central organizing principle in contemporary societies, on a par with other key mobilizing concepts such as “community,” “society,” and “nation.” However, whereas the latter are usually recognized as contested ideological terms that are seldom innocent or politically disinterested, there seems to be no such critical sensibility or public skepticism toward the idea of “policy.” Typically, “policy” is represented as something that is both neutral and rational: a mere tool that serves to unite means and ends or bridge the gap between goals and their execution—in short, a legal-rational way of getting things done.

Our argument is that these assumptions (even the claim to “rationality”) need to be questioned rather than taken at face value, and whatever else it might be, policy must also be understood as a type of power as well as the embodiment of a certain kind of instrumental reason. Indeed, the field of policy studies has often evaded serious critique because it has not adequately explored how policy narratives mobilize the language of science, reason, and “common sense.” Policy can be presented as apolitical because it appeals to seemingly neutral scientific reasoning or incontestable assertions about human nature. In this way, policy makers can mute opposition not through crafty Machiavellian maneuvers but by simply casting counter-arguments as “irrational” or “impractical.” Thus, a key task for the anthropology of policy is to expose the political effects of allegedly neutral statements about reality.

From an anthropological perspective, a striking aspect of modern-day society is the extraordinary extent to which the idea of policy has become implicated in the organization of human affairs. Indeed, policies of one kind or another now shape and regulate the conditions of our entire existence. From the cradle to the grave, modern human subjects are governed by—and through—the norms and dictates of particular policies, whether these be concerned with public health, employment practices, education, national security, taxation regimes, “good governance,” or equal opportunities and race relations legislation. Indeed, almost every aspect of contemporary life is now subject to the implementation of policy or has been rendered an object or “target” of policy makers: from the age one can vote, drive a car, retire, or have legal sex, to the care and schooling of children, the conduct of parents and professionals, and the design of homes. Even the concepts of individual rights and the “private citizen” are, in effect, artifacts of policy. In this sense, it is useful to think not only of the constraining dimension of policy but also of how it fashions modern identities and ideas about what it means to be human.

By classifying people and problems (and particular people as particular policy problems), policies actively create new categories of individuals, such as “citizens” and “ratepayers,” “asylum seekers” and “economic migrants,” “geriatric mothers,” “adjunct professors,” “self-employed consultants,” “the long-term unemployed,” and the “working poor.” The latter is a category that was itself recently invented by the British government through its Working Poor Initiative—an initiative, it might be added, that the government implemented to address the poverty trap that it had previously helped to bring about by its earlier policies of deregulation and labor market flexibility. The point here is not that policy dictates the behavior of its target population but rather that it imposes an ideal type of what a “normal” citizen should be. Individuals of a population must contend with, measure up to, subvert,

manipulate, or simply internalize these ideal types as part of their own identity. In short, modern power largely functions not by brute imposition of a state's agenda but by using policy to limit the range of reasonable choices that one can make and to "normalize" particular kinds of action or behavior.

Many anthropologists study these processes ethnographically. For instance, Les Field (1999) demonstrated that the policies developed by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, and those who work for its Branch of Acknowledgement Research, bureaucratically stamp who can be federally recognized as an "Indian," thereby determining the fate of many unrecognized tribes, their lands, and their ability to participate in lucrative gambling ventures, not to mention deciding which kinds of tribal knowledge are relevant and which are not. Similarly, anthropologists are studying the effects of the 1993 Native Title Act in Australia. This act is predicated on the notion that common law can recognize the "rights and interests" held by Australian aboriginals only in lands they can show they have continuously inhabited through history and on which they have practiced traditional customs, such as hunting and other practices. Yet such a notion, argue some anthropologists, ignores the forcible removal and relocation of these groups, meaning they often cannot prove to a court's satisfaction traditional continuity with their lands and practices (Glaskin 2000; Povinelli 2002).

### *"Policy" as the object of analysis*

The model of policy making in the rationality project is a production model, where policy is created in a fairly ordered sequence of stages, almost as if on an assembly line. Many political scientists, in fact, speak of "assembling the elements" of policy. An issue is "placed on the agenda," gets defined; it moves through the legislative and executive branches of government where alternative solutions are proposed, analyzed, legitimized, elected, and refined; a solution is implemented by the executive agencies and constantly challenged and revised by interested actors, perhaps using the judicial branch; and finally, if the policy-making process is managerially sophisticated, it provides a means of evaluating and revising implemented solutions. (Stone 1988, 8)

The anthropology of policy brings much-needed perspectives to the influential field of public policy and the growing area of enquiry that falls under the broad heading of "policy studies." The problem with much of the latter is that it continues to operate within a positivistic paradigm that treats policy as a reified entity and an unanalyzed given, seldom questioning the conceptual or cultural bases of its own analytical assumptions. As the above quote by Stone (1988) indicates, there is also a tendency to view policy, if not as a linear process, then as a neat, logical, orderly, and rational set of flows and procedures that move rationally and systematically from formulation and design to execution and evaluation.

In other words, public policy is often thought of as an "assembly line" or "conveyor belt." But 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. For example, as Wedel (2001, 8-9) found in her study of

Western assistance to eastern Europe, 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. Despite recent ethnographies illustrating the limitations of the rational choice model in “policy studies,” anthropologists have yet to put forth a compelling, coherent critique of that model.

## Analyzing Policy Processes and Addressing Theoretical and Methodological Challenges

The anthropology of public policy is at the core of theoretical and methodological challenges currently facing anthropology—and its potential contributions. While de-masking the framing of public policy questions, an anthropological approach constructs an understanding of policy processes focused on how actors mediate those processes. “Anthropologists,” Shore and Wright (1997, 13) suggested, are uniquely positioned “to understand the workings of multiple, intersecting and conflicting power structures that are local but tied to non-local systems.” An anthropological approach attempts to uncover the constellations of actors, activities, and influences that shape policy decisions and their implementation, effects, and how they play out. Anthropology therefore gives particular emphasis to the idea that the study of policy decisions and their implementation must be situated in an empirical or ethnographic context: They cannot be adequately mapped using variables whose values and correlations are prespecified by an abstract model.

### *Rethinking the “field”*

Studying policy requires rethinking an anthropological pillar—the discipline’s traditional concept of “the field”—as a single and (relatively) geographically bounded place (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 37). Today, “the field” often consists of loosely connected actors with varying degrees of institutional leverage located in multiple “sites” that are not always even geographically fixed.<sup>5</sup> With the post-cold war world’s increased delegation of authority by states and international organizations to private organizations, companies, and actors, the architects and agents of a policy may be elusive, varied, and diffused. Policies are no longer formulated primarily by governments, but additionally by a plethora of supranational entities, businesses, NGOs, private actors, or some combination of these.

Anthropology offers a social organizational approach that illuminates the structures and processes that ground, order, and give direction to policies. An ethnographer explores how individuals, organizations, and institutions are interconnected and asks how policy discourses help to sustain those connections even if the actors involved are never in face-to-face (or even direct) contact. “Studying through” (Reinhold 1994, 477-79; Shore and Wright 1997), the process of following the

source of a policy—its discourses, prescriptions, and programs—through to those affected by the policies does just that. For example, Shore and Wright (1999, 2000) have used this approach to examine the cultural consequences and implications of British government reforms of higher education since the 1980s. Similarly, Wedel (2001) has studied “through” the interactions of donors and recipients to explore the social organization linking the overlapping arenas of activity navigated by actors. By charting connections among actors who may not know each other but are situated among these arenas, “studying through” can illuminate how different organizational and everyday worlds are intertwined—and their relationships of power and resources—across time and space. Interactions in these arenas are not only between actors on the ground (for example, donor and recipient representatives and other parties to an aid process) but also between the larger systems they represent (for example, nations in Wedel’s study).

### *The value of social network analysis*

Social network analysis, which unites both theory and method, can help illuminate sites of articulation and interaction and thereby provide a snapshot of the workings of transnational policy processes. Network analysis, which focuses on social relations rather than the characteristics of actors,<sup>6</sup> is powerful not only as a method but also as “an orienting idea,” as Scott (1991, 37) proposed. By linking actors, network analysis can show how the local or regional level is connected with the national level or the local, regional, or national level with the international.

Employing network analysis, an ethnographer can examine relationships between individuals, groups, and organizations and the changing, overlapping, and multiple roles that actors within them may play. Social analysts have linked network structures to collective processes.<sup>7</sup> Dezalay and Garth (2002, 10), for example, showed that “tracing the careers of particular individuals makes it obvious . . . that the world of foundations and that of human rights NGOs have always been very closely related; how through concrete networks and careers the World Bank interacts with local situations; and how corporate law firms or advocacy organizations modeled on those in the United States are brought to new terrains.”

Such analysis can serve as a persuasive basis for explaining policy decisions. Wedel’s (2004) social network study of a core group of “neoconservatives,” first published in *The Washington Post*, highlighted a dozen or so long-connected players, a “flex group,” whose skill at maneuvering 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, proved essential to the group’s influence on American public policy. The group’s “flex organizing” enabled it to play a pivotal role in shaping U.S. policy toward the Middle East and taking the United States to war in Iraq.

Network analysis—and the social organizational framework that it implies—is a useful way to conceptualize the mixes of “state” and “private,” of “macro” and “micro,” of “local” or “national” and “global,” of “top down” versus “bottom up,” and of “centralized” versus “decentralized” that today configure many transna-

tional policy processes. Anthropologists are thus well positioned to track the interactions between public policy and private interests and the mixing of state, nongovernmental, and business networks that is becoming increasingly prevalent around the globe.

The value of a theoretical and methodological framework that can both dissect and connect levels (such as local and global) and spheres (such as state and private) is difficult to overstate in a multilayered and rapidly changing world. Today, many in the world, most obviously players in policy processes, are perplexed when asked questions like “Whom do you work for?” “Who is responsible?” “Who owns the company?” or “Whom does he represent?” Analysis of relationships between actors, both individual and collective (such as network analysis reveals), enables an ethnographer to see different levels and arenas of activity in one frame of study and to observe how they are interwoven.

### *Methods for an anthropology of public policy*

Anthropology takes as a given that much of its most useful information can only be obtained through trusted “informants.” The “extended case method” (Van Velsen 1967, 145), in which the ethnographer follows interconnected actors around a particular series of events, lends itself to the study of ongoing policy processes. The actors’ responses to the same questions (regarding, for example, their own and others’ activities, perspectives, and networks) are then compared and assessed over time. Although actors involved in a particular “case” sometimes are located in different sites, they always are connected by the policy process and/or by actual social networks.

However, in as many sites as possible, anthropologists strive to conduct participant observation or at least some long-term association with actors in their own territories (Agar 1996, 58). When this is impossible or impractical, however, they employ alternative methods. In “studying up,” conducting interviews is often the only means of gathering firsthand information and gaining entrée to difficult-to-access “fields,” such as individuals in powerful institutions. For example, it was only because the U.S. Army’s School of Americas suffered from a moment of public vulnerability after pressures from human rights groups that Gill (2004) was provided an opportunity to interview graduates of the school. When interviews are the primary source of information from a particular site, cross-checking critical information and corroborating key points with multiple sources is crucial (Wedel 2003).

Anthropologists employ additional methods as well. “Talking to and living with the members of a community,” Gupta and Ferguson (1997, 37) reported, “are increasingly taking their place alongside reading newspapers, analyzing government documents, observing the activities of governing elites, and tracking the internal logic of transnational development agencies and corporations.” (In the appendix, we offer a brief illustration of this argument using the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act as a case study.) Wedel (2001, 222-24) added that she consulted project reports, internal memoranda (such as materials obtained under laws such as the Freedom of Information Act), and independent organizations. She also estab-

lished mutually beneficial collaborations with congressional and parliamentary staff, officials charged with monitoring, and investigative reporters. Consulting such sources, she found, served to corroborate, broaden, and lend enhanced credence to her work.

### *Rethinking professional ethical codes*

Studying “up” and “through” also necessitates rethinking the ethical codes designed with studying “down” in mind. Several anthropologists (including Wedel 2001, 223; Konrad 2002, 227; and Shore 2002, 11) have called for a reexamination of the traditional ethic ordaining that an anthropologist’s “first responsibility is to those whose lives and cultures we study.” When the people being studied are more powerful than the studiers, this precept in the American Anthropological Association’s (AAA’s) Code of Ethics (1998),<sup>8</sup> and echoed in that of other social science organizations, is problematic. Wedel (2001, 223), for instance, asked, “Does an anthropologist have the same responsibility to an agency that employs a public relations staff as it does to a tribe facing extinction?” She reported that “anthropologists engaged in research in government agencies on sensitive issues may find it difficult to proceed without employing ethics from journalism because it will be expected of them by their sources,” such as federal administrators, congressional aids, and other powerful individuals typically interviewed by journalists but not anthropologists. She concluded that studying powerful institutions and actors should thus bind anthropologists to the ethical code and practices of journalism with regard to treatment of “sources.”

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*[The AAA’s] code makes it clear that anthropologists primary ethical obligation is to the people they study and that anthropologists are cautioned to do no harm to the people with whom they work.*

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Similarly, those anthropologists working in medical and legal contexts must inform themselves of the risks of working in these settings, as well as what ethical expectations their informants have. For example, the confidentiality of an anthropologists’ field notes became the focus of attention when anthropologist Sheldon Zink’s field notes of the AbioCor artificial heart trial were subpoenaed in a legal

case on whether the hospital had failed to inform the patient, who died, and his family about the dangers of the trial (Free Sheldon.org 2003). Zink's case was confounded since her research, which was not federally funded or based at a university, had not been subjected to institutional review board oversight; further complicating things, she changed her role from one of researcher to patient advocate during her time at the hospital. In response to Zink's ethical dilemma, the AAA (2003) adopted a Statement on the Confidentiality of Field Notes, reiterating that its code makes it clear that anthropologists' primary ethical obligation is to the people they study and that anthropologists are cautioned to do no harm to the people with whom they work. At the same time, it acknowledged that the code states that "the degree and breadth of informed consent" is situational to the context in which a study takes place and the requirements of other "codes, laws, and ethics of the country or community in which the research is pursued." It is at the end of the statement that the AAA noted the changing nature of anthropological fieldwork: "We believe that an environment of distrust results if field notes are not protected against the use by public officials or other persons having physical or political power who might wish to use the notes to investigate or prosecute research subjects or people with whom we work."

## Critiquing Conventional Wisdom through Anthropological Analyses

Bringing anthropological analysis to public policy can help counteract three related and dominant trends. The first is the tendency to treat "policy" as an unproblematic given, without reference to the sociocultural contexts in which it is embedded and understood. The paradigm of positivism continues to dominate much of the "policy studies" literature and approach. Anthropology provides a necessary corrective to both of these shortcomings and introduces a more reflexive perspective on policy as an idea as well as a set of processes.

The second of these is the domination of public policy and debate, and even scholarship, by ideologized discourses, such as those of globalization, democratization, and privatization. Kalb et al. (2000, 8) observed that the very "neglect, denial, or even conscious repression, of institutional complexity, social relationships, contingency, and possible contradictions" turned the concept of globalization into the "ideological magnet" it became. By highlighting interactions and interfaces among parties to the policy process, anthropology can provide a counterweight to these discourses.

The third trend that anthropological analysis can help counteract is the use of flawed dichotomous frameworks (such as "state" versus "private," "macro" versus "micro," "top down" versus "bottom up," "local" versus "global," "centralized" versus "decentralized") so prevalent in public policy. These frameworks tend to obfuscate, rather than shed light on, the workings of policy processes. By analyzing the construction and building blocks of policy—actors and organizations, their activi-

ties and points of articulation—anthropology can take on the complexity, ambiguity, and messiness of policy processes. In a rapidly changing world, anthropology's reliance on ethnography to help construct the variables being studied and its focus on the interactions in which parties to the policy process engage (regardless of whether they do so willingly or wittingly, or even see themselves as "parties") is ever more crucial. Anthropological analysis can disentangle the outcomes that are produced and help explain how and why they often contradict the stated intentions of policy makers.

An anthropology of public policy should not only add to the body of substantive knowledge about the way the world is changing, but it should provide a critical corrective to the simplified models that work well in journals and textbooks yet 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.

## Appendix

### Case Study: The USA "PATRIOT Act"

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In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001, a hastily drafted antiterrorism bill was presented to Congress that, according to both supporters and critics of the legislation, has laid the foundations for a domestic intelligence-gathering system of unprecedented scale and technological prowess. Known as the PATRIOT Act (its full title being the Uniting and Protecting America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act), the new bill rapidly passed into law on October 26, 2001. The speed in which the new law was ratified reflected the climate of wartime politics (fuelled by fear of further terrorist attacks and "weapons of mass destruction") and the desire of the Bush administration to capitalize quickly on the bipartisan mood in Congress. Among its provisions, the PATRIOT Act empowers the government to shift the primary mission of the FBI from solving crimes to gathering domestic intelligence; charges the Treasury Department with building a financial intelligence-gathering system whose data can be accessed by the CIA; and, for the first time ever, gives the CIA authority to influence FBI operations inside the United States and obtain evidence gathered by wiretaps and federal grand juries. More specifically, as McGee (2001) observed, the bill "effectively tears down the legal fire walls erected 25 years ago during the Watergate era, when the nation was stunned by disclosures about presidential abuses of domestic intelligence-gathering against political activists."

At its signing, President Bush described the bill as "an essential step in defeating terrorism, while protecting the constitutional rights of all Americans," which would "give intelligence and law enforcement officials important new tools to fight a present danger" (Bush 2001). A few weeks later, President Bush also signed an order empowering him to authorize military trials in the United States and abroad for international terrorists and their collaborators. These military tribunals can impose sentences as severe as



death on a two-thirds vote, hold trials in secret, and rely on evidence that would be rejected in a civil court. Furthermore, Bush's order does not allow for judicial review. Some legal experts claim that the order appears to be an attempt by the president to suspend the right of habeas corpus for those accused of plotting against the United States (who would, by definition, be in violation of the laws of war and therefore ineligible for protection under the U.S. Constitution). The American Civil Liberties Union has warned of the dangers to civil liberties posed by the bill. For example, section 802 of the act redefines "domestic terrorism" so broadly that it could now encompass World Trade Organization protesters and Greenpeace activists.<sup>a</sup> The act also permits a vast array of covert information gathering, effectively giving the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency license to spy on Americans. The recent history of the CIA's involvement in illegally spying on seven thousand Americans in Operation CHAOS (including anti-Vietnam War protesters, so-called black nationalists, and student activists) was precisely what led to restrictions on the CIA activities during the 1970s.

As one might expect, many critics voiced opposition to the bill, particularly the way it redraws the line between civil liberties and national security. Reflecting on the history of intelligence abuses, Senator Frank Church warned that domestic intelligence gathering was a "new form of power," unconstrained by law, often abused by presidents and always inclined to grow (McGee 2001). Even conservative Republicans, such as Robert L. Barr Jr., characterized the government's plans as ethnic profiling, power grabbing, and overzealous law enforcement. Still others have denounced the proposal for military tribunals and secret evidence as "third world" practices (Lardner 2001). During the debate over the passage of the bill through congress, Senate Judiciary Chairman Patrick Leahy raised several of these concerns. Attorney General John Ashcroft's reply was that "talk won't prevent terrorism," adding that he was "deeply concerned about the rather slow pace of the legislation" (*The Washington Post* 2001). Republican Senator Orin Hatch voiced similar frustration with an attempt to debate the proposal in the Senate; "[Delays] are very dangerous things. It's time to get off our duffs and do what's right" (*ibid*).

Stepping back from all this, what is anthropologically interesting about the PATRIOT Act is precisely the language in which it was presented to the American public. While the dominant discourse was national security and the threat by terrorists who, in the words of George W. Bush (2001), "recognize no barrier of morality," "have no conscience," and "cannot be reasoned with," the policy narrative was filled with metaphors of "danger," "the urgency of a nation at war," and the need to "bring down walls" between intelligence gathering and law enforcement. A recurring motif in the discourse of the U.S. government was that these measures were "necessary tools" to enable "our nation's law enforcement, national defense and intelligence personnel" to "bring terrorists and other dangerous criminals to justice" (U.S. Department of Justice 2004, 1). The very identification of these kinds of threats and crises in public policy serve as a foil against which national identity is consolidated and dissent pushed aside (Campbell 1998; Feldman 2005). Significantly, the U.S. Department of Justice defended these new powers in terms of their contribution to combating pedophiles (the other folk devils that pose a public threat to "our way of life").

The very title of the legislation—with its flagrant exploitation of the themes of “patriotism,” “state of emergency,” and defense of the nation—were similarly designed to reassure the public about the righteousness of the proposed changes while marginalizing opposition to the bill. As U.S. Attorney General Ashcroft opined in November 2001, “The highest and most noble form of public service [is] the preservation of American lives and liberty” (U.S. Department of Justice 2001). This followed President Bush’s call for public unity and support for those men and women in the FBI, law enforcement, intelligence, customs, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), and secret services who are “serving this country with excellence, and often with bravery” (Bush 2001).

The PATRIOT Act passed with little vocal opposition. Most critics either stonewalled or simply caved in to pressure to vote for the bill for fear of being deemed “soft on terrorism” and, by implication, weak on defense of the American nation. *Insight* magazine reported that only two copies of the bill were made available in the hours just before its passage, and most representatives admitted to voting for the bill without even seeing it (*Insight*, November 9, 2001). As one Republican critic of the bill (Texas representative Ron Paul) complained,

The insult is to call this a “patriot bill” and suggest I’m not patriotic because I insisted upon finding out what is in it and voting no. I thought it was undermining the Constitution, so I didn’t vote for it—and therefore I’m somehow not a patriot. That’s insulting.

The success in muting political opposition was matched by the burden the act placed on the various nonstate actors whom it affects. One good example is found in air transportation. While the PATRIOT Act renders the violation of aircraft illegal, the enforcement of this law is largely left to private industry in the form of either private security companies or the airlines themselves. Airlines are understandably sensitive to potential lawsuits if another terrorist attack occurs after the culprits pass through their own security checks. Thus, they have incentive to err on the side of caution about letting passengers on board even if passengers fully pass their own established security standards.

The standards, however, are flexible and subject to interpretation based on the stereotypes of who a terrorist might be. For example, in December 2001, Assem Bayaa, an American citizen of Middle Eastern descent, was removed from a United Airlines flight from Los Angeles to New York just prior to takeoff. Despite having cleared security checks, the crew “felt uncomfortable” having him on board the plane, and he was ordered off of the plane without any questions and without having been searched. A civil rights lawsuit was filed against United Airlines, which subsequently filed a motion to dismiss the case. A federal judge rejected the motion and stated that despite pilots’ having discretion in deciding who may or may not board an aircraft, they do not have a “license to discriminate” (American Civil Liberties Union 2002a).

While the result in this particular case constituted a victory for civil liberties, the more significant point to note is the broad latitude that the private airlines have acquired in matters of “national security.” The anthropological explanation for the United pilot’s removal of Assem Bayaa should not be reduced to the legal language of

simple “discrimination.” The effects of the policy process are more complex. As a private company, United Airlines’s foremost concern is profit, which produces a tension between the cost of potential lawsuits resulting from arguably insufficient security measures and the cost of implementing those measures. Yet underlying the pilot’s action was a complex mix of social and cultural factors having to do with “risk management,” “moral panic” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), and heightened public fear about Arabs and Islamic fundamentalists. If even the pilot himself holds no such stereotypes about Arabs as dangerous extremists, it is hard for any pilot not to be influenced by public pressure or popular representations that construe particular individuals as likely terrorist suspects on the basis of their physical appearance.

What this case study illustrates is the triumph of the discourse of national security over that of civil liberties—a triumph engineered as much by the mobilization of rhetorics of fear and “states of emergency” as by those of patriotism and xenophobia. While anti-foreigner sentiments and Islamophobia certainly achieve victories in some instances, it is the narrative of “national security” that remains the irremovable reference point that sanctifies the PATRIOT Act and against which oppositional voices struggle to be heard. But it would be misleading to view the implementation and enforcement of the USA PATRIOT Act as simply a matter of the state versus civil society. Like policy in general, the PATRIOT Act binds together a wide variety of actors, institutions, and agendas in new and ambiguous relationships. Actors with the legal, political, or institutional leverage can “clarify” these relationships by appealing to the discourses that dominate the current political climate. “National security” is perhaps the foremost discourse of the American present, and it manifests itself in myriad ways in the practice of daily life as well as in the way it is woven into the fabric of public policy. The current state of alert and call to action for a “war on terrorism” recalls a comment made long ago by the critic Walter Benjamin (1969, 257), writing against another call to crisis, and on the eve of another war: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.” Benjamin’s thesis has more than passing relevance to current U.S. defense policy. As Elaine Scarry (2002) wrote, speed has repeatedly been invoked by governments over the past fifty years to centralize power; counter ethical, legal, or constitutional objections; and sidestep the democratic process in the United States.

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a. Section 802 expands the definition of terrorism to include “domestic,” as opposed to international, terrorism. A person engages in domestic terrorism if he or she commits any act “dangerous to human life” that violates the criminal laws of a state or the United States, if the act appears to be intended to (1) intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (2) influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (3) affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping (American Civil Liberties Union 2002b).

## Notes

1. The Interest Group for the Anthropology of Public Policy (IGAPP), affiliated with the American Anthropological Association, was founded in 2004 (by Gregory Feldman and Janine R. Wedel) to provide an institutional framework to identify and foster the work of anthropologists studying policy. IGAPP’s goal is to

strengthen the contributions of the anthropology of public policy to the discipline and to interdisciplinary theory on policy.

2. There have been many conscious efforts on the part of anthropologists to personally participate in public debates and influence social and policy processes. One well-known example is Sol Tax's (1975) "action anthropology." Drawing on the liberal-humanist tradition of John Dewey, Tax stressed that research and new knowledge should help humanity solve problems that inhibit growth and development. Believing that anthropologists should engage in action aimed at improving a community's capacity for self-determination, Tax and his students from the University of Chicago developed community projects, such as the Fox Indian Project in Tama, Iowa, which he directed from 1938 to 1962.

Another example of anthropologists taking part in public debates is Basch and colleagues' (1999) focus on academia and higher education policy. Basch and the other contributors to *Transforming Academia: Challenges and Opportunities for an Engaged Anthropology* promote an "engaged anthropology," referring "to the anticipation of changes that will affect anthropology and to developing strategies to deal with them proactively and intentionally, rather than waiting to react" (p. 291). This stance shares much with the public interest anthropology (first proposed in *Anthropology and the Public Interest*; Sanday 1976), which emerged to focus on the relationship between basic and applied research in anthropology, one where anthropologists would contribute to public policy by isolating "variables that can be manipulated by public policy and with the identification of the point at which the cost of changing inputs outweighs the expected benefits" (p. xvii). Some contemporaries called this a "social engineering" approach to policy (Belshaw 1976), or one that does not challenge the rational frameworks of the idea of policy making. Those engaged in public interest anthropology today have moved on to demonstrate how anthropologists can contribute to public education and debates (Sanday 1998). This is also the focus of the public anthropology movement spearheaded by Robert Borofsky, which also aims to make anthropology more accessible to a diverse public, seeing this as an ethical responsibility (PublicAnthropology.org n.d.).

3. Anthropological tradition lies in studying the local level (often "on-the-ground" communities), but an ongoing discussion in the discipline questions the nature of the local. Gupta and Ferguson (1997, 15) suggested that "the idea of locality is not well thought out" and called for its reexamination. Ortner (1997, 76) observed that "we can no longer take communities to be localized, on-the-ground entities, or at least that their local, on-the-ground form is only one moment and site of their existence."

4. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <http://www.oed.com> (accessed April 28, 2005).

5. Increasingly, anthropologists are conducting de-localized fieldwork among people connected with one another. For example, Ortner (1997) studied a high school graduating class that once had been part of an "actual on-the-ground community" that is now dispersed throughout the United States.

6. Pioneers in the field of social network analysis were John Barnes, Clyde Mitchell, and Elizabeth Bott, all associated with the Department of Social Anthropology at Manchester University in the 1950s. They saw social structure as networks of relations and focused on "the actual configuration of relations that arose from the exercise of conflict and power" (Scott 1991, 27). For analysis of the contribution of the Manchester school to the development of social network theory, see Scott (1991, 27-33).

7. Laumann, Marsden, and Prensky (1989, 62) maintained that "features of a network can be used . . . to show the consequences of individual level network processes at the level of the collectivity." See also Marsden (1981).

8. The American Anthropological Association's assertions about ethics have always reflected an ongoing assumption that anthropologists' primary ethical responsibility is to those they study. Still, through the discipline's history, anthropologists have not always been in agreement about what this means, as clearly evidenced by Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban in *Ethics and the Profession of Anthropology* (1991). There, she considered how controversies such as the censure of Boas in 1919 and Project Camelot in the 1970s illustrate disagreement about the role of anthropologists in policy processes, particularly clandestine research. While Boas was censured by the American Anthropological Association for his public outcry of anthropologists who used their professional identity to spy on behalf of the United States during World War I, the association developed its first professional ethics code following debates about Project Camelot, which had allegedly proposed that social scientists engage in clandestine research in South America for the United States government. In its 1971 "Principles of Professional Responsibility," the Association stated such engagements should not be pursued.

More recently, a 1995 forum on the topic of "Objectivity and Militancy" in *Current Anthropology* focused on debates in anthropology about the relationship between science and advocacy. There, Nancy Scheper-Hughes proposed a "militant anthropology," one that makes sure the primacy of the ethical is upheld through political engagements on behalf of those studied. Roy D'Andrade, on the other hand, defended objectivity and science, maintaining that "any moral authority that anthropologists may hold depends upon an objective understanding of the world and to that end moral and objective models should be kept distinct."

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