Anthropological Findings and Contributions

The call for attention to women's issues even inspired the Donato Star to highlight anthropological findings, usually given short shift by press at the IAS conferences. In somewhat journalistic style, “How Equality Saved a Tribe,” was the lead featured on the front page for the opening weekend, a description of research conducted by Richard Lee and myself. In an interview with reporters, Lee noted that up till now, women living in the Ju’hoansi villages of the Kalahari appear to have more flexibility to negotiate their relations with Ju men and lower rates of AIDS than the surrounding populations. Although this situation is rapidly changing as roads, tourism, housing construction and other forms of investment engulf the Ju region, Ju women and men have joined village councils in the attempt to limit the dangerous impact of such developments.

In most parts of southern Africa today, the one-woman-to-one-man HIV prevalence ratio found at the onset of the epidemic is now three young girls to one young man in the 15–29 age groups. In the face of such disproportionately rising rates of HIV/AIDS among women and particularly the growing mortality rates of young girls, some concern that up till now, women living in the Ju’hoansi villages of the Kalahari appear to have more flexibility to negotiate their relations with Ju men and lower rates of AIDS than the surrounding populations. Although this situation is rapidly changing as roads, tourism, housing construction and other forms of investment engulf the Ju region, Ju women and men have joined village councils in the attempt to limit the dangerous impact of such developments.

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No less significant than recognizing the changing views of men and women, is to understand the perceptions among cosmopolitan policymakers in New York, Washington DC and Geneva. What options do such influential groups regard as culturally appropriate for the women confronting the epidemic? International decision-makers and local governments and health professionals, relying on static images of tradition, culture and modesty, can too easily fail to grasp the capacities of people to change and learn new methods or for communities to work collectively against the epidemic.

Women and men are already constructively responding to desperate circumstances. Early in the conference, plebaries shaped by boards and funders presented AIDS as a measurable problem with scientific solutions. Meanwhile, in the Women’s Networking Zone of the Global Village (where activists did not have to pay the $1,000 registration fee), on panels, over coffee, neglected by daily press reports, women worked to craft a social movement that would confront the real dilemmas of grassroots change in the political-economic sphere where AIDS does its deadly work.

SUSAN WRIGHT
DANISH U OF EDUCATION

The starting point for the new Interest Group for the Anthropology of Public Policy (IGAPP) was the realization that “policy” is as significant an organizing concept in society as others, such as “family” and “society,” which have traditionally been central to anthropology. Large branches of social life, especially in Western societies and increasingly in Third World contexts, from the cradle to the grave, are organized under the rubric of “policy.” If this is the ethnographic reason for an interest in policy, there are also conceptual and methodological reasons. A focus on “policy” engages anthropologists in a re-conceptualization of the field for research, as potentially including all the organizations—from the international to the local—along with people, procedures and texts that have to do with a topic. Field and site are clearly no longer coterminous. Rather than studying up, or down for that matter, anthropologists can select sites from which to follow a flow of events as they move up and down, back and forth, across this field.

“Studying Through”

Susan Reinhold, in her PhD thesis “Local Conflict: An Ideological Struggle: Positive Images” and “Section 28,” called this “studying through”—a term that has two meanings. First, by following the interacting flow of events through different sites (including localities), the media, national and international fora, one can describe in ethnographic detail how something came about. Second, deeper than the descriptive level, a study of a policy process acts as a window onto changing forms of governance and regimes of power.

Thus, the point of an anthropology of policy is not to study policies for their own sake—that’s the realm of public administration and organization studies. The point is to use policy as a window through which to see processes of political transformation, or to analyze what the present is producing, as Sally Falk Moore put it in her 1987 American Ethnologist article, “Examining the Present: Theoretical Dilemmas in Processual Anthropology.”

A History to the Field

The anthropology of policy originated in a session at the conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) at Oslo in 1994. This led to Anthropology of Policy, Critical Perspectives on Governance and Power, which I co-edited with Cris Shore in 1997. The authors in this volume boldly proposed the anthropology of policy as a new field emerging from the traditions and interests of political anthropology. These ideas have also been taken up by anthropologists in the US, not least Greg Feldman and Janine Weidel, who worked with the authors of the original text and an impressive list of founder members to establish a new interest group for the anthropology of public policy at the AAA.

Launched with a session at the AAA meeting in Washington in 2005, IGAPP has become the fastest growing new group in the history of the AAA with 674 members in a year. Intent on developing the anthropology of policy simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic, the organizers have engaged in their own version of a circulating nummib. In September 2006 this took the form of a session of the EASA’s conference at Bristol, with the theme “Policy Worlds,” organized by Davide Pero, Cris Shore and Sue Wright, with participation from both Europe and the US.

A Body of Research

One of the aims of the session was to bring together ethnographic studies of policy processes, both by established figures in the field and by some of the many PhD students who are adopting an “anthropology of policy” perspective. One set of papers concentrated on government-led processes of reform: Schweger on social security in Mexico, Catey on the National Health Service in Wales, Nielsen on the reform of universities in Denmark and Nyqvist on the pension system in Sweden. A hallmark of these studies, which set them apart from much political science and public administration, was that they gave equal weight to the viewpoints of both governors and the governed.

Many also experimented with new research strategies and methods. Such as, Nielsen, and Reinhold and Wright traced the many different stories and contested versions of reform, and used these to generate fresh insights into the anthropology of the state and to show how through a sequence of events the reform’s key concepts were contested and negotiated. Three papers took the exploration of relations of power further: Wedel with a stunning ethnography of the Neocron, Hatton with a study of the role of academic research in UK policymaking on immigration, and Kugelberg with an analysis of relations between self-organizing immigrants and local authorities in Sweden.

A further set of papers focused on the subjects of policymaking: Pero used case studies of immigrants in three European countries to show how some of the very weakest subjects of policy actively used a combination of strategies to get some policies implemented that would help their situation, and to get others changed. Zinn followed the protests over and resistance to the Italian Council of Ministe’s Legislative Decree to create a centralized nuclear waste storage facility in the coastal town of Scanzano. Feldman analyzed how in the post-Soviet era, the Estonian government had constructed empowered Estonians and newly minoritized Russian speakers as two ethnic subjects of the state, then addressed them in an advertising campaign aimed to get them to view each other as “nice people” who can work together, get on together and create an integrated Estonia.

Susan Wright is the co-editor of Anthropology of Policy (1997). Along with Davide Pero and Cris Shore, she is preparing a proposal for a book which, ten years after Anthropology of Policy, will reflect the developments in studies of policy, governance and power described in this article.