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

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

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

In terms of its contributions to anthropology, the study of policy has considerable potential to pioneer theoretical and methodological innovations in the discipline. A key reason is that it forces anthropologists to recontextualize ‘the field’ as a site of ethnographic inquiry (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Studying policy makes it possible to bring directly to policy the groundings provided by global processes.
1. We have co-founded the Interest Group for the Anthropology of Public Policy (IGAPP), which is affiliated with the American Anthropological Association, to provide an institutional framework to identify and foster the work of anthropologists studying policy. IGAPP’s initial projects include compiling existing anthropological studies of policy discourses, processes and impacts, and developing curricula and syllabuses. We welcome the input of readers in these efforts, which we believe are crucial first step toward strengthening the contributions of the anthropological science to the discipline and to interdisciplinarity on policy. Please send ideas and bibliographic references to: gfel@interchange.ubc.ca and jwedel@ucla.edu.

2. See van Velsen (1967).


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