

The Politics of “Policy”: An Anthropological Approach to the Study of Power and Governance

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Wednesday 24th October at 3 pm

Forty years ago Laura Nader (1972) issued a call for anthropologists to ‘study up’ by using their discipline’s methodologies to critically analyse the cultures of the rich and powerful. Nader argued for research that would penetrate the ‘hidden hierarchies’, the facelessness of modern bureaucracy and the structures of power in order to shed light on the forces that shape social relations and everyday life in contemporary societies: our own as well as others. One aspect of that agenda has entailed critical engagement with elite cultures and the worlds of policy, policy makers and policy making. This paper explores the contribution that the anthropology of policy has made to Nader’s agenda by raising four key questions: What exactly *is* policy that it can be studied anthropologically? How do policies ‘work’ as instruments of power? What new kinds of assemblages and political subjects do policies create, and how is policy used to classify, manage and mobilize populations? What theoretical insights does an anthropology of policy offer for critical social science? We draw on recent contributions to this emerging field - including our co-edited book *Policy Worlds: Anthropology and the Analysis of Contemporary Power* (2011) to address these questions and to generate debate over the implications of treating policy as a subject and object of analysis.

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Government, Governance and the State Seminar Series Coordinators: Russell Prince (r.j.prince@massey.ac.nz) and Aisling Gallagher (a.gallagher@massey.ac.nz), Geography Programme, School of People, Environment and Planning, Massey University.