THE SORCERER'S APPRENTICE

An Anthropology of Public Policy

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To Betty

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The Author

CYRIL S. BELSHAW (Ph.D., London School of Economics) is Editor, *Current Anthropology*, and Professor of Anthropology, University of British Columbia. Dr. Belshaw's field studies over the past several years have taken him to New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands, New Hebrides, New Caledonia, and British Columbia. He was a member of the United Nations Economic and Social Council team to evaluate the effects of technical assistance to Thailand in 1965 and on various occasions has acted as a consultant for the Bureau of Social Affairs of the United Nations, and for UNESCO. He is on the Executive Committee of the International Social Science Council and the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences and is Chairman of the Pacific Science Council's Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities, and the IUAES Commission on Ethnocide. His previous books are in the fields of economic anthropology, applied anthropology, and university affairs. Dr. Belshaw is also the author of several social and cultural anthropology books.

The Sorcerer's Apprentice reflects his interest in examining the role of anthropology, and its relevance to world society.

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Acknowledgments

The theme has, however, been gestating ever since my entry into anthropology in the late 1940s, and perhaps even before. It has obviously been influenced by personal experience, as a colonial civil servant concerned with administration and development during World War II, as a student and young man influenced by my father's economics and by his international career with the Institute of Pacific Relations and with FAO, as a scholar drawn into some of the activities of the United Nations family, as a fieldworker talking with people caught up in the impact of world events upon village life, and as an administrator of a university department, discussing the profession of anthropology with colleagues in North America, Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Friends in all these contexts have influenced my thought and reading and, even more, have opened opportunities to see events at first hand and to obtain a variety of experiences that would otherwise have been denied me. It is to these friends, in many walks of life, from humblest villager concerned with his family's uncertain future to international civil servant on a dizzying pinnacle of world responsibility, that I owe my perspective. I know that those of them who will read the book will recognize their influence, and will understand that my statements do not intend to supplant their deeper knowledge, but are intended to lead to further conversation.

In all that has gone before, my family has played a special role. It is symbolic that my children have celebrated birthdays in five countries, in thatch huts and Swiss villas—a situation not uncommon for anthropologists. My wife has not only shared the long-term fieldwork, contributing her knowledge and understanding, but has helped live through the production of the earlier studies which, in various ways, have paved the way for this one. And for all of them, including this, her steadfast editorial sense has saved me many an embarrassment.

Les Mischabels, Montana, Valais, 1973   CYRIL S. BELSHAW
Vancouver, 1973–4

Perspectives

WHEN I made my decision to study anthropology, in the 1940s, my choice
was affected by concerns that remain with me today. Even though
anthropology was then a far less voluminous body of writing than it is
now, with fewer well-developed subfields, it nevertheless seemed to offer
perspectives which could add subtly to our understanding of man's
condition. The comparison of social and cultural systems, and the
analysis of function and conflict, were but two of the many important
themes that carried lessons largely ignored by policy makers and by
scholars in other disciplines. Anthropology needed not only to hone its
tools but to offer the fruits of its labors to others.

Thirty years of work by innumerable scholars in many countries have
increased data and knowledge. But we are still only partially applying
ourselves to the real issues. Books on applied anthropology tend to deal
with "exotic" culture. The time has come to make the link between our
knowledge of other parts of the world and the issues that face industrial-
ized society. Some anthropologists have indeed made the connection—
Margaret Mead and Jules Henry, to name two. These beginnings must be
strengthened. We should not be content with philosophizing comment
drawn from subjective experience. Our research approaches social ex-
change, the function of myth, religious experience, and a host of other
topics in special small-scale settings. We can follow through such topics
with important results if we apply the same methods to studies of our own
society, and we shall alter our view of our own world if we do so. Too few
of us try.

The result is, in part, that the general public, and particularly the policy
makers, regard anthropology as a curious discipline, containing many
unreadable books, and a few which delight because of the quaint unreal
worlds they seem to describe. This is to misrepresent the force and idea of
anthropology. But it is the fault of the profession for not thinking out the
wider implications of its work and for being unadventurous in speculating

beyond the customary bounds. This book attempts to make part of the link. In doing so, it will infuriate some, because it deliberately ranges widely. I stray beyond my proper discipline and will therefore make mistakes. But it is important to me to run that risk. Mistakes can always be corrected. But I am trying to create an overall perspective which will suggest disagreement, provoke research in fields new to anthropology's tradition, and awaken scholars and some interested members of the public to a few of the issues, the dangers, and the promises of an anthropology of public policy.

We are often regarded as people who study other humans who live in villages in other countries. There is truth in this stereotype. In this book, however, I am going to devote very little space to the village world as such. Marshall McCluhan's concept of "the global village" is ear-catching, and somewhat suspect as an intellectual gimmick. We certainly do not have to be committed to the superficialities of that approach to recognize the more complex and deeper reality. The population of the world lives within *one* social system.

It is a simple, banal idea. But like so many other simple truths, it is difficult to put to work. The world social system is so complex that it cannot be grasped at one time in its totality. We must think about it in different ways, and often bit by bit. I try in this book to use a few of the ideas developed by anthropologists in their treatment of the village world, and to extend and amend them into the more complex analysis of a world social system.

This differs from the traditional anthropological approach, which is to see a community in "ecological" perspective—that is, to treat it as a system in symbiotic interaction with an immediate environment. Such an approach is a necessary part of the scene, but I want to go further and at least to raise questions (but seldom provide answers) about the global system in which we all live. And in taking this step, building upon abstract notions of social transactions, cultural systems, and the like, I find that we are inhibited, in analysis and in applied practice, by the ambiguous but powerful notion of nationalism. Time and again I have found myself faced with the necessity of accounting for it, clarifying it, and drawing implications about its effects. As I moved from the village to the wider world, the anthropological significance of nationalism became inescapable.

One of my long-standing complaints about anthropology has been that although its business is to look at the empirical reality of what might be termed alternative cultures, it does not speculate about what might be. As good objective scientists we note what is. But society is creative. It

consists of men and women who are striving. David McClelland makes the untenable assumption that some people want to achieve and others don't. My perspective is that we *all* achieve. In an ultimate sense, society is itself policy making.

If we accept this simple premise, the way is open to us as anthropologists to ask some of the kinds of questions that are asked with less inhibition in other social sciences, more particularly economics and political science. We can ask, what do particular societies achieve? I have worked out the theoretical implications of this question, around the idea of comparative social performance, elsewhere. In this book, I want to bring the theory down to earth, but in minimizing jargon I hope I have not lost sight of some of the logical problems contained in the question.

And we can go on. What could societies achieve, if they did things somewhat differently? How much do we still need to find out in order to comment sensibly on alternatives? What are the logical traps in setting them out?

To invade such territory is to expose our intellectual troops to the possibility of glittering booty. Sensibly, many colleagues have been suspicious of such an enterprise. The power of influencing decisions can be heady, the rewards can look more real than they are, and we are tempted to convey our subjective values as objective or dogmatic truth. The advice of social science, and especially of anthropology, can be wrong-headed, falsely founded, and improperly motivated. It is of the greatest importance that anthropologists address themselves to world issues. It is also of the greatest importance that both the public and scholars themselves be reasonably aware of the possibilities and limitations of an anthropology of public policy. There have been too many false claims to success and wisdom. They have been counterproductive, inhibiting the evolution of innovative creativity. The theme runs through the whole of this book and is treated at length when I talk of the modes of action and advising. When I write for scholars, I hope some members of the public will be alerted. When I write in more general terms, I hope that specialist scholars will relate their interests and experience to the public need.

And, above all, I desperately hope that students, looking to their future, whether or not they are to be professional anthropologists, will take up some of the challenges that I am deliberately laying down.

Purists will accuse me of mixing my reading public. I make no excuses. The issues I raise are at what our scientific colleagues call the "interface" of the concerns and interests of scholars and the public. I believe that

scholars must see, outside the confines of ideological rhetoric, the public implications of what they do, and that the public must be in a position to watch them doing it, with understanding. This book is an attempt to move in that direction.

PART I

Policy and Anthropology