

PART 2: ANTHROPOLOGY, CULTURAL STUDIES AND ORGANISATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Four authors analyse Sue's impact on the discipline of anthropology and on the postgraduates she supervised. They highlight in particular her contributions as a teacher and her advocacy of what she terms 'political reflexivity'.

KEYWORDS

anthropologists in policy and practice, community studies, cultural studies, feminism, mobilising metaphors, situated actors, Thatcher government, welfare state

Anthropology in the thick of it, or post-professional society finds its analyst

Christopher Newfield

Sue Wright's career has been one of imposing productivity, so I'll select from her very rich body of work one major issue that has been particularly important to me. That is the creation in Europe, in the wake of the economic and social turbulence of the 1970s, of what I'd call *post-professional society*. Such a society remains complex and dependent on socio-technical systems and, of course, advanced expertise. But it replaces profession-based knowledge governance with managerial authority and audit mechanisms. A more familiar term for this society is the 'audit society'. Sue has written abundantly and foundationally on the changes covered by this term. She has focussed as much on the outcomes as on the means. She's studied audit institutions and procedures in great detail but always with attention to their



effects on the social and cultural systems in which expertise is embedded – the professions.

I first worked with Sue Wright as an associated faculty member of her Marie Curie Initial Training Network, called ‘Universities in the Knowledge Economy’ (UNIKE). We met in various countries for several years, a combination of professors and graduate students and local scholars in a changing and cohesive series of communities. It was the best experience of academic collaboration of my career, by far. I learnt that Sue had been setting up collaborations like this for most of her career, I assume in order to meet the scale of our intellectual problems with the scale of diverse expertise required to confront them. One of our extended whistle-stops was in Porto, Portugal, in 2015, where I interviewed Sue for several hours about her career. Since I saw her as an impresario of collaboration, I was not surprised to learn that her first regular academic post was a part of an enormous group study of the changing welfare state in Britain in the late 1970s and the effects these changes were having on towns and institutions across the country.

Sue had been propelled there by what she called the ‘double revolution’ of 1979: one in Iran, which forced her to stop her fieldwork there, and one in Britain, with Thatcher’s taking of power promising to remake the country. ‘We knew’, Sue said, ‘she was going after trade unions – that was quite visible. But that went hand-in-hand with attacking welfare state professionals. And the universities were in there with that’. Sometime after Thatcher came to power, ‘there was a green paper issued that said that universities had failed the economy. We didn’t know that we were responsible for the economy. This redefined the universities, and nobody really contested that’. It was the beginning of transformations in Western knowledge institutions that would preoccupy Sue throughout her career.

Her guiding interest was more general than this, however, and began with her doctoral fieldwork in Iran in the 1970s: ‘I was studying the impact of tribal people in Iran who were responding to the Shah’s organising state. The theme that runs through a lot of my work is “how do people interact with large processes and transformations?”’ At one point in this study, Sue ran out of money. ‘So’, she told me, ‘I got a job in ’78 as an anthropologist in a multi-disciplinary team in a planning department in University College London looking at whether British policies in rural areas were actually causing some of the problems experienced by people in rural areas. The planners jokingly called it “Tribe and State in Dorset”’.



Sue had been told even by supportive advisors that not to work out of a university department of anthropology was not to be an anthropologist. but she 'didn't feel that at all'. In fact, when she went to a conference the following year, 'I met 100 anthropologists exactly like me'. It was partly the absence of posts – then down to two or so a year in anthropology – but 'actually we didn't necessarily want an academic job, because we wanted to use anthropology to look at what was happening to the welfare state – and to see how to interact with the processes that were going on'. This work was quite urgent: this was the year that, intellectually, 'Labour lost the welfare state'. Well before anyone had turned higher education into an audit culture, Sue was working on how people confront large-scale systems and was applying this interest to the British welfare state in its early stages of dissolution.

A third theme in her work has been the one I encountered first – large-scale collaborative study. In 1981, she joined a network set up by a like-minded anthropologist at the University of Sussex, who wanted to find non-academic jobs for unemployed anthropology PhDs. Eventually, they

created a network that had 300 members, who were working in all sorts of areas – health, local authorities, housing, NGOs, international development – all seeking to use anthropology to change the world, to put it bluntly . . . We brought people together to talk about what was going on. We brought the community workers together, we brought the housing workers together, we brought people from industry together as well.

Sue continued:

You have to remember that in the early Thatcher era nobody knew what was going on. Members of the Conservative party didn't know what was going on. These anthropologists were right in the middle of these processes of change in local authorities and the public sector. They could sense things going on. They could see things going on to the processes of governing and new forms of power emerging. They could see symbolic things happening around language. They could point to these things. But in their daily work, they didn't have time to stand back and analyse them. Language, symbols and power are bread and butter for anthropologists. Through this organisation, I started getting people together to generate discussions to develop a research agenda to take back to the academy.

I'm often stuck by Sue's sense that no barrier exists between academic thought and the world that anthropologists study. For her, the world needs always to come into the academy. Yet, at the same time, the academy must be independent and able to offer diverse expertise undistorted by government or business and offer scholars and students the time – the temporary detachment or distance from immersion in the scene itself – for study and for thinking, all in an institution that allows thought to unfold according to the practices developed by its many professional communities. This intellectual autonomy is what the university has to offer, allowing its people to address the world's problems. To use a later language, impact requires freedom. That freedom is not personal liberty but professional autonomy constituted and regulated by the expert community itself.

Anthropologists worked as 'situated actors within a changing context'. If an anthropologist worked full time in a community organisation and had no access to university time and space themselves – time to think, space for autonomy in thinking – they could direct the attention of academic anthropologists to the right issues and structures. Sue helped write training modules to make these connections easier to develop between social scientists inside and outside the academy and the wider systems they were studying. 'In the middle of all this, I got a lectureship at Sussex, which gave me more access to do this kind of work. I was also studying the transformation of governance in north-eastern England. I was studying Parliament, a local authority, and villages that were affected by Thatcher's cutback of heavy industry . . . the people most remote from the centres of power'.

'You were really an anthropologist out of bounds', I said. She responded: 'I was never an anthropologist, because I didn't go to Africa or Asia – I'd gone to Iran'. We laughed. 'But I did realise', she said, 'that universities were an extremely important site for the changes I was trying to study in my impoverished village in the north-east of England. . . . I suddenly thought: "I'm in the centre of this process of change. I'm as much a situated actor as these people working in the local authorities"'. She continued:

About this time, the Ministry of Employment set up a project and Sussex was one of the places to get a grant. It was called 'Enterprise in Higher Education'. This gave Sussex a heck of a lot of money to work with lecturers to get them to change their teaching practices along the lines the government thought were necessary to create a new kind of labour force in Britain. The words were very important. Quality was an important word, and it was moving. Government would take a word that was held



dear by academics, twist it a bit, attach it to a steering technology, and feed it back to us as though it were our word. But it wasn't. And this is what at the end of the 1980s I began to study.

Sue then said that

the phrase that really got my attention was in a memo sent to Sussex that said that the aim of higher education was to create 'reflexive practitioners'. Self-reflexivity was a very important concept in the feminist anthropology that I came out of: the idea was to look at ourselves as positioned actors in the situation we were studying. For instance, for the first few months of my fieldwork in Iran, I didn't get a minute to ask a question. They were asking me questions: 'Why did the British in 1945 do such and such?' 'How many colonies does Britain still have?' 'Why does Britain hold on to these colonies?' 'Why is there fighting going on between Bangladeshis and Pakistanis in Bradford?' I didn't know there was fighting going on in Bradford! They were asking all these questions about the history of Britain and Britain's involvement in Iran. . . . It had made arrangements with the Indian Army to control one border and trade route, and arrangements with the Russians to control the southern half of Iran. Some of my villagers had operated as guerillas during the war, and they still wouldn't talk to me.

I entered into a situation where I had no choice but to see myself as carrying a political history with me. They made me very conscious of that. I was prepared to say that for much of what Britain had done in Iran – well I was not in favour of that. But I was not prepared to take personal responsibility for what three generations of Brits had done, an upper class that my family had never been part of. So we engendered quite an interesting debate about how to see ourselves as carriers of social privilege and historical fortunes, and having advantages or disadvantages from that, and to what extent were we responsible for that. And that's the kind of positioning that feminist anthropology really got into.

What struck me about this was that Sue's kind of self-reflexivity meant the anthropologist *did* have to take responsibility for the history they carried, even when they had no wish to carry it:

When it came to doing fieldwork, the point of that anthropology was to try to become aware of how people were looking at you. That was then a way to use yourself as a tool to find out a lot about the society. What happened with the boys (in anthropological theory) was that they turned

it into a narcissistic exercise of reflecting on yourself, which knocked all the politics out of it. With feminists, it was very politicised and politically conscious. . . . It meant becoming very aware of how people responded to what you said, so you could minimise negative impacts on the society that you were in.

When I came to start to think of myself as a situated actor in the university, I started to use that same repertoire of ideas and techniques. But the idea was how to use them to change the society as much as I could. So I turned the notion of political reflexivity around, and I began to teach courses on that at Sussex. I taught independent studies to undergraduates. They could do whatever they liked, as long as they were trying to see themselves as situated within a wider world and how they could influence that world and why they would want to influence that world. The idea was to have creative, politically reflexive practitioners.

Sue was linking two concepts that I came to see as characteristic of her approach. The first is to see the investigator as a bearer of a situation. She bears a political history that she must know as an investigator, but – here’s the catch – not know it through introspection but through observation of its impact on the community with which she works. Reflexive knowledge of one’s own subjectivity is communal and derives from an intersubjective process in which others are active contributors at every point and in which they must be continuously kept in mind. The second concept is that this type of feminist (collaborative, socialised, intersubjective) reflexivity can be used either to minimise impacts on a community or to try to change it.

This bears directly on the study of one of Sue’s core university themes – the replacement of the communal self-reflexivity that established professional standards for knowledge with external audit in the name of mission and quality control. She could use her version of self-reflexivity to try to change what was happening to the very institution, the university, that supported her version of self-reflexivity in the world. That effort at intervention would not politicise or corrupt the knowledge thus produced because the analysed experience of being a situated actor was where that knowledge came from in the first place.

I think this method is correct. But it brought Sue into conflict with the form of self-reflexivity that the government wanted universities to teach to build the new British workforce. ‘The message coming down was that we had to create reflexive practitioners’, Sue said, ‘because their idea of reflexivity was to create people who will go into a work situation [and] will under-



stand what demands that work situation has on them, what skills, attributes and behaviour it wants. And you will adjust yourself to the demands of the market. That was the opposite of what I thought we were in education to do'.

Sue's understanding of feminist-social self-reflexivity – and its institutions – has underwritten her study of the transformation of university practices by audit. Where is agency? Whose agency must be preserved? Her sense of self-reflexivity's necessary autonomy, autonomy as a non-individualist practice in a community, helps motivate her demands on the university to support autonomous enquiry and her very high standards for its intellectual ethics and daily practice. Sue did not say this, but my sense of the history is that her high expectations for the university – that it continue to fulfil its intellectual missions for society, come what may in government – put her at odds with many of her colleagues. The same was likely true for her definition of self-reflexivity, namely, that it requires an *effort to influence* the situation, to be not only aware of one's situatedness but to act on the system. This resolve is rare enough in the professional-managerial class.

Sue got intellectual support from the neighbouring discipline of cultural studies. Sue told me:

It was a good experience for me to be an anthropologist in cultural studies. 'Who's defining what for whom, with what material circumstances?' These [words] had formed a catchphrase for me. The same was true for Stuart Hall, and I got an enormous amount from his work and that of other cultural studies colleagues. There was background awareness of the way power and political relations lurked in language as well as in institutions. That helped us during this period when the government wanted us to turn our students into factotums and we didn't.

This period was interesting for an anthropologist who focussed as much on language as on organisational procedures. 'The whole political vocabulary of Britain was moving all the time', Sue noted. 'Thatcher was an incredibly good politician in the sense that she could seize moments', and much of this seizing consisted of the redeployment of major words in the national vocabulary. 'For example,' Sue said, 'when some Anglican bishops objected to the effects on ordinary people of one of Thatcher's signature policies, she referred to them in a speech as the "cuckoo bishops". This helped legitimise her policy as certainly difficult but impressively daring'. 'The bishops did respond', Sue added, 'but it took them months. By the time their paper came out, the moment was gone'.

I asked: 'You were trying to set up an interpretative shop, so there was a basis of understanding and then some experts could respond immediately to what was happening to political language?'. 'Yes', she answered. 'But we couldn't really. We didn't have the resources to set up a full centre. Yet I kept at it. I was listening carefully to BBC 4, to debates in Parliament. Doing this, it became clear that the word "individual" became very important. I was tracking that'. She continued:

This work helped with the community studies. At one point, I had a secondment for a year to a local authority that was trying to restore a notion of community and public good to contest the rollback of the state. The authority was trying to change how it operated. It had been a Labour baronetcy for years. What should it be now? I did an organisational ethnography. And I was trying to do the fast-response stuff. I wrote eight reports in that year. It was clear that policy language had become important in the local situation. I remember a woman who said to me in 1991: 'I've worked out what Mrs Thatcher means by "enterprising individual". I am one. She means we have to run our schools. But we don't have enough money. We are supposed to raise money with car boot sales. But we can't raise money with car boot sales in a deprived area. So we have to sack somebody. And we have to sack the teacher whose daughter is a friend of my son. I'm totally compromised. I'm totally caught. This is the trick. This is the deceit'.

'So you did this work through the whole 1980s?', I asked. 'Yes', she replied. 'Every break, every summer vacation. And I was still at Sussex, which I didn't leave until 1997'. There seemed to me to be consistent parallels between the Thatcher government's treatment of local authorities and of universities. Sue agreed. But it was not only the government directly. It was also how the government induced consent from other entities and distributed responsibility across entire sectors. Labour was also very good at this and it came into government in the year Sue moved from Sussex to Birmingham.

One turning point, Sue said, was the Jarratt Report [1985] on efficiency studies in universities: 'It was about turning universities into corporations with vice-chancellors as CEOs representing the university and making all major policy decisions from the top'. In their formative book chapter, 'Coercive accountability', Sue and Cris Shore identify this report as a key source of the idea that 'the crucial issue is how a university achieves maximum



value for money'. To address this question, the VC, as chief executive, must henceforth develop strategy that links 'academic, financial and physical aspects' into 'one corporate process' (Shore and Wright 2000: 67). They wanted every department to function as a separate cost centre. Citing the report, they note it called for 'the centralization of executive control, the linkage between budgetary and academic considerations and the decentralization of accountable budgets to the lowest level' (Shore and Wright 2000: 67–68). They write that this was a combination of top-down authority and decentralised execution that required internalised consent.

'They implemented it', Sue said. But the 'they' here was not the Thatcher government. The report had been commissioned by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals in concert with the government's University Grants Council. It reflected the wishes of managers, and it was their efforts that brought it into use across the university sector. 'We just all felt so buffeted', Sue recalled:

It was one change after another. The whole strategy of the government was to tire us out. It was the ratcheting of higher education. They increased the student numbers one year. Then set the budget for the staff the next year. We were regularly overloaded and scrambling. This was the period when the VCs started to see themselves as embodying the university. Manager salaries went up. Then, in 1992, the polytechnics became universities. This was presented as a popular opening, but it was also a way of reducing the unit cost of higher ed. It was accompanied by an escalation in the whole discourse of university staff being lazy.

I noted that people associate Tony Blair's New Labour with the big expansion in British higher ed. It was Blair who had announced that goal of fifty per cent of the population having bachelor's degrees. 'Did this pushing down of rules ease up when Labour came in?', I asked. 'Not really', she replied. 'The private partnerships increased. There were some bad cases that gave people pause. I remember one university did do a private partnership. The contract was that if the company made a loss the university would cover that loss before it paid for anything else. The university wound up sacking eight per cent of their staff, but these arrangements continued'. She then explained this change from her point of view:

I was at Birmingham for some of this period. Initially, the new government wanted big subject centres across disciplines. I won the contract for

anthropology, sociology and politics. It extended across all four countries of the UK. It covered 300 departments and started in 2000. With all this government money, it was possible to find funding possibilities where there was room to manoeuvre. I always did the letter of what the funder wanted, but in addition I did some things that were different from what they expected. It was Labour that decided in 2003 to close the subject centres down. They moved to a different system. Now it was: 'These are the areas we're funding; you're to tell your people to get on with it'. We had been trying to gain the trust of the people we were working with. When you've figured out how to do that, you send it back up and say: 'We're not defying you, but we're doing it this way'. This was always part of this educational development work. But the Blair government changed that. It was now very top down.

Sue had moved to Cultural Studies at Birmingham, but an inexplicably bad score on the Research Assessment Exercise gave the Vice-Chancellor a reason to close the department: 'We had six weeks to redistribute our 450 students. While we were trying to figure out what to do, I got an offer from Denmark for a chair in education. I've been in Copenhagen ever since'. 'This renewed turbulence, induced from above – this was all under Labour?' I asked. 'Yes', Sue confirmed. 'Has anyone written up these turning points that include the major initiatives of both parties?' 'No', Sue replied. 'There are histories of the big reports – a lot has been written on Dearing and on Browne. But something like closing a department? It was common, and it's a tiny thing. The history of higher ed policy is a series of tiny things'. 'No one has written a history of the tiny things?', I asked. 'No. But I've found my notes for talks to the 300 departments. This is my history of the tiny things'.

As I see it, governments coming out of the 1970s had at least four motives for bringing universities into a new subordination to the state's immediate policies. The most visible was that universities had been sites of intellectual critique and social movements against Cold-War-era authority. Many conservatives saw them as an enemy within, just as they saw trade unions.

The second motive was economic decline: the OPEC oil price shocks in 1973 and 1979 and the wider inflation crisis showed how fragile post-war prosperity was. Conservatives were unwilling to rethink capitalism or condemn short-termism, low domestic investment, offshoring, environmental dumping and other problems with the business system. It was far easier and more suited to their preconceptions to accuse universities of having let



the economy down, as Sue summed up the 1985 report to me. Universities were to be held responsible for the development of new knowledge – really new technology – and of job-ready human capital for the benefit of a business system that would not be asked by governments to improve their own social effects.

Government's third motive was to put Anglo-American society back at the forefront of the technology-fuelled knowledge economy. This was a vital issue in the years after the loss of the Empire (for Britain) and of South Vietnam along with economic control over Japan and the rest of East Asia (for the United States). Their 'catch-up' with the leading Western economies had clearly worked. Universities needed to be harnessed for economic competition in Western economies – used and carefully controlled.

The fourth motive, which was related to the first, was the need to put the professional-managerial genie back in the bottle. The professional middle classes had come to think that their high levels of education and expertise entitled their members to a growing slice of the economic pie. The same was true in politics: they had become accustomed to substantial political authority, and their 60s and 70s children had gone into the streets for the feminist, civil rights, anti-war, gay/queer and early environmental movements, which would expand that authority still further. A racially-integrated university-educated middle class was still over the horizon, but conservative radar had picked up warning signs.

Universities were not a sideshow in this managed transition from democracy to 'post-democracy' (Crouch 2004). A key task for this transition was to separate professional expertise from the power and standing of the professions. Expertise had to become *post-professional*. It could be very well-paid, as is the case in finance or in US medical specialisation. But expertise had to become externally controlled by the political and economic authorities of the society rather than self-managed. In tandem with this, professionals and the working-classes alike were about to see their erstwhile masters terminate the exceptional period in which wages – and experts' salaries – grew as fast as or faster than the rate of growth of capital investment (Piketty 2014).

Governments and the widespread audit industry have claimed that replacing professional self-governance with (generally quantified) audit has improved the reliability and uptake of professional knowledge. But analysts have been largely unable to identify these benefits. When the historian Jerry Z. Muller surveyed a range of domains for evidence that audit directly improved outcomes, he found only one kind of case – in medicine – but

that was not an example of external audit but of quantitative data used collaboratively by a clinical group in a practice of professional self-governance. (Newfield 2019).

This is not to say that experts have not made many mistakes and also overridden and damaged democratic accountability – they certainly have (Newfield et al. 2022). But severing knowledge creation and use from collaborative self-regulation has inhibited knowledge creation and public use in the era where that knowledge is most needed. We often assume that reducing the authority of professionals will increase the authority of marginalised communities that deal with problems the central governments or corporate leaders don't think are important. The opposite may be the more common case: the lowering of the status of academic knowledge has also lowered that of community producers. In other words, audit may have insured suboptimal knowledge creation during important transitional years that we are never going to get back.

Among the major distinctions of Sue's career is that she took this crisis on directly, as an anthropologist, in her research, teaching, fieldwork and community work. She analysed how it operates as a system, identified its effects and developed mechanisms for building alternatives to it rather than only criticising it or making a private peace. One result has been a series of papers that specify the effects of audit practices on the production of knowledge whose producers audit alleges to help. One of my favourite lists of effects appears in a piece she wrote with Cris Shore in 2015 called 'Audit culture revisited'. These are:

1. loss of organisational trust;
2. elaborate and wasteful gaming strategies;
3. a culture of compliance and large compliance costs, including the appointment of new specialists preoccupied with creating positive (mis)representations of performance;
4. defensive strategies and blamism that stifle innovation and focus on short-term objectives over long-term needs;
5. deprofessionalisation, a disconnect between motivation and incentives, lower employee morale and increased stress and anxiety;
6. 'tunnel vision' and performing to the measure, with a focus solely on what is counted, to the exclusion of anything else; and
7. and the undermining of welfare and educational activities that cannot be easily measured. (Shore and Wright 2015a)



These outcomes of audit culture have hamstrung the professions in ways that Sue has done as much as anyone to explicate for all types of audiences. She includes every kind of practitioner in the scope of 'professional', particularly front-line carers, local authority employees and others who are involved in the application of knowledge to everyday life and who in the process create new knowledge that society needs to recognise and put to use. The United Kingdom is now trying to restore productivity growth and rebuild social systems in a post-professional condition. Are we facing a choice between audited, post-professional knowledge production and knowledge abundance across a full range of disciplines? If so, audit is going to have to go. Sue reminded me several times:

We're trying to create a different kind of education. It's not about resisting the current form. A resister would be trying to go back to a golden age. There wasn't one. At important points in my career, I was resisting the bullying and the bad gender politics I was experiencing as much as I was resisting the government's neoliberalising. I didn't want either of them. I wanted something different. I wanted something new. I was looking out. We have public responsibilities, but we are also professionals and have responsibilities to ourselves.

From the frying pan into the fire

Georgie Wemyss

When I graduated from University College London (UCL) aged 21, I was convinced that I would never engage with anthropology again. I was rejecting the discipline because of its integral relationship with European colonialisms. I also acknowledged that studying it had forced me to confront British histories of colonialism and violence from which I and my extended family had clearly benefitted. Eight years later, after working in youth and community work and qualifying as a teacher, I rediscovered social anthropology as a subject that can be used to expose coloniality, challenge whiteness and overturn racialised and gendered hierarchies. I enrolled on a part-time MA at the University of Sussex whilst continuing to teach in a further education college in London. My intention was to use the theoretical

and methodological tools that the discipline of anthropology had taught me to analyse and change inequalities in Britain and globally.

My interests meant that I was based in the School of Cultural and Community Studies studying modules taught by anthropologists, including Sue Wright, who directed ethnographic research towards the smoke and mirrors of politics and policies of the Global North as well as the Global South. Sue's personal warmth, her critical intellectual engagements with the type of anthropology I was newly experiencing, and her guidance in discussing theory and carrying out ethnographic research and writing during my MA gave me the confidence to later embark on a PhD with her as my supervisor. Her research, writing and pedagogical approach continue to influence my own research and teaching in many ways.

My PhD ethnographic work developed in dialogue with Sue's research experiences in community work contexts, an early inspiration being her considered study of a carnival in north-east England (Wright 1993). In my MA tutorials, she had guided me through complex ways of thinking through 'culture', ideology and conflict, different positionalities and ways of 'studying up' – all later discussed in her introductory chapter "Culture" in anthropology and organizational studies' that so clearly framed the *Anthropology of Organizations* volume that she edited (Wright 1994). These discussions and more helped me develop confidence in conducting my own ethnographic research. Ringing in my head, as I grappled with ideas of Britishness constructed through political contests in east London in the 1990s, were her critical observations of academic writing that presented 'disembodied discourses' that appeared to have 'a life of their own' unattached to any individuals or organisations. The vast collections of pre-internet newspaper cuttings, radio and TV recordings, policy documents, leaflets, scribbled notes and ephemera under the stairs and in the eaves of my home are a legacy of my attempts at identifying who exactly was saying what, why, when and where. They were the evidence used to explore how the various and specific discourses collected related to those identified in my participant observations and interviews. My resulting monograph, *The Invisible Empire: White Discourse, Tolerance and Belonging* (Wemyss 2016), developed two lives because of Sue's equal attention to both ethnographic detail and theory. In one life, it sits alongside sociological texts on critical race theory shelves, and in the other it is used actively as a local anti-racist history resource.

Sue's careful attentiveness to my ethnographic training and writing impacted on more recent research on state bordering that I completed with



colleagues from sociology and geography. Her warnings about 'disembodied discourses' chimed again as we tried to design and implement ethnographic research within very limited time and space restrictions. I referred back to ideas that I had found critical during my PhD research as I looked for the deployment by differently situated actors of 'mobilising metaphors' that Sue and Cris Shore had explained as the 'keywords whose meanings extend and shift whilst previous associations with other words are dropped' (Shore and Wright 1997a: 20). We tracked keywords, 'semantic clusters' and 'mobilising metaphors' that othered minoritised people or normalised whiteness in media and political debates at multiple levels during the passing and implementation of the 2014 and 2016 UK Immigration Acts (Wemyss et al. 2018; Yuval-Davis et al. 2019). The tracking of competing discourses associated with different groups enabled us to develop the concept of *everyday bordering* so that it became useful beyond academia. 'Everyday bordering' and 'everyday border-guarding' became keywords in contesting discourses as they were used by activists in submissions to Parliament protesting the extension of the UK border further into everyday life via the UK Nationality and Borders Act 2022.

In 2010, after working in further education for two decades, with teaching loads increasing and the anthropology modules I had developed on Access to Higher Education programmes being phased out, I decided that I wanted to move to higher education where I could access research opportunities and publish beyond my PhD findings. The technologies of 'audit culture' that Cris Shore and Sue had so powerfully exposed in relation to higher education a decade earlier (Shore and Wright 1999) was already structuring further education. At that time, it seemed to me, from outside the UK academy, that the pressures of increased teaching, benchmarking and other auditing regimes had not yet kicked into universities to the extent that they had in further education (or have in universities today). My first thought was to discuss my options with Sue. Her immediate response was not to discourage but to warn me that I would be jumping from the *frying pan* of further education into the *fire* of higher education. Armed with that awareness, I took the leap from being scalded by further education auditing regimes to the bonfire of higher education, where I experienced that which Sue had warned me about with the expansion of auditing cultures through universities. However, it was some years later, based on dialogue between my lived experiences as a university academic and my reading of Sue's more recent work on audit cultures and universities, that I fully understood her

vision, reasoning and advice. My experience meant that I could tick the full list of negative effects of audit cultures in higher education outlined in Cris and Sue's 2015 article on revisiting audit cultures. These include the loss of organisational trust, a culture of compliance and associated costs, a focus on short-term objectives over long-term needs, lower morale, increased stress and anxiety, performing to what is counted and the undermining of educational activities that cannot be easily measured (Shore and Wright 2015a and expanded on in Shore and Wright 2015b and Wright 2015). Thanks to Sue's past intellectual and practical training and her more recent research and insights, I have been well prepared for the current challenges and conflicts in UK higher education.

An anthropology of practical consequence

Steffen Jöhncke

If I should sum up how I think of Sue Wright's approach to anthropology, it would be that the discipline has a certain kind of critical perspective on the world that must have consequences for its practitioners. By this, I do not simply mean that anthropological scholars should provide insights with potential implications for how to improve the way the world is organised and governed (and I think Sue would also agree with such a critical agenda for anthropology). Rather, I mean that Sue's work expresses the understanding that anthropology's epistemological claim to making a certain sense of people and their lives has ethical, political and professional consequences for anthropologists' daily practices – irrespective of what those practices are, inside and outside of academia. These are not ethics and politics of mainly abstract ideals as much as they are about how to meet, treat and understand other people – in teaching, in collaborative work, in research, in policy, in daily organisational life. Anthropology is a certain kind of social activity; it must be conducted responsibly, and it has consequences. This is not only about the consequences that come out *of* practice, it is also about consequences *for* practice. It has implications for how we may perceive of anthropological work within and beyond academia.

Admittedly, I knew little of Sue Wright's work when I came to the University of Sussex in 1989 to do an MA in social anthropology and social policy.



But after having taken some of her classes there, I was in no doubt at all that I wanted Sue as my supervisor for my dissertation. Sue had practical experience as an ‘anthropologist in policy and practice’ – a term that was being suggested in the United Kingdom around that time (Wright 1995: 68) as an alternative to the term ‘applied anthropologist’. Sue was very actively involved in organising and developing activities of interest to anthropologists outside of academia through the Group for Anthropology in Policy and Practice (GAPP), later the British Association for Social Anthropology in Policy and Practice (BASAPP), a network that evolved into the Anthropology in Action group and its eponymous journal. Sue and collaborators also saw the need for anthropology students to learn more practical skills for their future professional work life than the ones taught at universities, and she helped set up a vocational training course (Wright 1995: 70) that I had the benefit of taking.

On the face of it, Sue and I had very different practical experiences and interests. While Sue had been working as a rural community worker (Wright 1992: 16) in England and was interested in the relationships between communities and all levels of government, I had been collaborating with social workers on understanding the plight and support needs of male sex workers in Copenhagen under the impact of HIV. However, we quickly found common ground in an interest in exploring the contribution of anthropology to solving practical problems.

In a fascinating account of her work with the inhabitants of a small hamlet in rural England that was affected by a failing and contaminated water supply (Wright 1992), Sue discusses how anthropology informed her approach. The political framing of rural community work had evolved over time, as indicated by shifting keywords of government policy: ‘participation’, ‘deprivation’ and ‘self-help’. Each of these terms indicated different expectations regarding the roles and tasks of community workers as liaisons between the rural population and authorities, but shifting policies also opened different kinds of opportunities for exploring how given power imbalances might be challenged. Central to this effort to give more scope to the perspectives of local communities was a questioning of how and by whom problems and solutions are defined. In the rural English hamlet, the problem of the calamitous water supply was cast by authorities in purely technical terms to be solved by the small number of hamlet inhabitants shouldering the huge bill for a new supply to be installed. In order to challenge this, Sue adopted an approach inspired by participatory research

(rather than ‘participation’) and was interested in how a better understanding of the inhabitants’ initially very diverse perspectives could still form the basis for common ground in terms of finding alternatives. In this work, not only was research in a usual sense needed, but also the mustering of the anthropologist’s communication and organisation skills. Moreover, the point was to direct attention to the complex and multi-layered political system of authorities and agencies involved, each of which – often to their perplexed denial – might share part of the responsibility for the situation. This focus ‘upwards’ expresses the intention to reorient the usual direction of research in which ‘people’ are explored for the benefit of decision-makers and instead make knowledge of the political and bureaucratic structures (as well as how to influence them) available to communities. In this case, with Sue’s support, the villagers succeeded in finding alternative funding sources for the renewal of their water supply. Other initiatives from the hamlet’s inhabitants, however, continued to be met with obstructive opposition from authorities – indicating the tenacity of power structures and the practical limitations of an official rhetoric of empowerment.

Sue’s subsequent work on the anthropology of organisations (Wright 1994) and of policy (Shore and Wright 1997b) obviously testifies to the same line of scholarly interest and critical enquiry as indicated by the community water supply case. Here, however, I am interested in what the case tells us about anthropological work as a professional practice. Sue’s role as a rural community worker was clearly not to be merely a researcher, providing knowledge for decision-making, and least of all her role was one of a *detached* researcher who had no part in assessing the political character and implications of knowledge. Sue was not willing to accept the context that the authorities were setting for her work: ‘If I would help passify [*sic*] the residents and help them to organize the raising of the capital sum amongst themselves, that would be appreciated, but they were concerned that I might “stir up the hornet’s nest”’ (Wright 1992: 27). Sue found an alternative context in her rural community council employer’s ‘idea of self-help associated with empowerment’: ‘My role as a community worker was to create a space for the residents to make their own definitions of the problem and its solution, and to persuade authorities to adopt these definitions and accept that residents operate according to their own ideas of community’ (Wright 1992: 27).

This approach suggests that we must resist the expectation that anthropology can be reduced to a practical set of methods for the provision of



useful knowledge that confirms existing distributions of power, particularly the power to define problems and solutions. Anthropologists working in practice beyond academia have different professional roles, different contracts and conditions of employment, and different sets of relationships with collaborators on various levels of organisation and management. What opportunities they have for being a critical voice that openly challenges power will vary according to different political and economic circumstances. However, invariably they will need to reflect on their professional role, which is often stretched out between two opposing sets of demands: on one hand, they often find the expectation to be useful along predefined political and organisational lines, putting their people skills to good use towards goals set by dominant professional world views other than the anthropologist's own. On the other, they are trained in a disciplinary culture according to which anthropology is morally *good in itself* and where any application of anthropological skills beyond academia is regarded with sceptical concerns about compromise and potential ethical sell-out (Jöhncke 2021). In this dilemma, anthropologists in policy and practice often find, as Sue did, that it is exactly the critical questioning of dominant constructions of problems and solutions that is at the core of their professional contribution – including the self-critical reflection on how one is placed in the structure. All organisations are both enabled and restricted by certain professional assumptions about their place in the world, and anthropologists help them explore whether they may be unnecessarily limited or impeded by these assumptions. From community work and policy studies to the development of products, markets, services and organisations, anthropologists need to question how problems and solutions (surprisingly often in reverse order) are defined and acted upon, by whom and in whose interest. As Sue's work demonstrates, the anthropologist in practice needs to develop and exercise more skills for negotiation and organising than those taught at university. The successful involvement of anthropologists requires a certain willingness on behalf of collaborators to be challenged in their existing manners and thoughts. Luckily, it seems to me that there is an increasing realisation within many kinds of organisations that they ignore the anthropological perspective at their peril. This points to the emergence of new professional roles for anthropologists. In this process of evolving anthropological practice, Sue's work – and not just the few examples mentioned here – is a continuous source for critical reflection and inspiration.

On the liveability of Mrs G's garden

Figuring out how one can live academia as multiplicity

Annika Capelán

While having lunch in Sue Wright's garden, I understand – then and there – that exploring university dynamics as entangled with political economy must be done from a deep sense of responsibility for education, for the makings of knowledge – and as a profoundly political act. After the chocolate cake, we stroll to the back of the garden to greet Mrs G. At first, I ponder on the word behind her 'G' ('Gift'? 'Garden'?). My pondering is disrupted by a speaking voice: somebody on the other side of the big sage bush reads loudly from a worn book: 'Follow the chicken and find the world' (Haraway 2008: 274).

Mrs G – the hen who runs Sue Wright's garden – is down-to-earth and long-feathered. When I observe Mrs G, I detect no hesitation in her when she meticulously unravels knots that are tightly tied around objects, spaces, rooms, even academic rooms. She converts those rooms into gardens by going for it again and again with her precise beak. She also seems to be quite clear about how to educate herself – and her chickens – to be critically reflexive about the predatory system gardens generate and are generated from. Despite its different kinds of fences and delimitation, Mrs G's garden is in no way a self-enclosed system.

Mrs G herself is a vastly experienced companion. Without resisting her own commodification, she is simultaneously a gift and a giver. She seems to navigate these relations without friction, echoing the 'eco' from eco-logy and eco-nomy into a cackling 'oikos' – oikos being the condition that generates the liveliness of human-managed species and zones (Green 2020; see also Latour 2004), be it humans and education or hens and gardens. Mrs G seems to 'go oikos' without the need to even notice – let alone dismantle or confront – those otherwise dominating regimes of modernist dichotomies.

Ricardo, a man sitting next to me, introduces himself mirthfully as 'non-academic'. As we engage in a conversation, I find that he is well read and has a vivid curiosity. He quotes Edward Said (2012) and points to the importance of an amateur's disposition, however professional we are. He tells the table that at a peculiar point of his life he found the world through a chicken. When he speaks, he does so as though from the depth of his



facial furrows, formed during long years in exile, those years that he spent asking why he survived while others were tortured to death. Now he says that he has had the opportunity to experience the smile of a chicken and that to him that smile – albeit elusive – had a life-shifting effect. He advises that everybody could experience this. He also says that from that moment every time he thought he knew something he soon realised that he was most likely mistaken. ‘For instance’, he reflects smirking, ‘how many times can a book be read before its letters dissolve?’

In response, I want to tell him about my PhD study, because – like so many other things – it grew in this garden. But rather than its clean results and clear-cut arguments, I want him to understand its knots, folds, shifts and cracks – those that helped me learn how to ask new questions, open up for new answers and other ways of knowing (Locke et al. 2021). I explain that the study began as an engagement with visual art through anthropology – and vice versa – and that it turned into something quite different. I want him to get a sense of how at the outset I was curious about both visual art practices and anthropological endeavours as apt for finding ways to know the world while at the same time shaping it. And that I eventually saw details and dimensions within and across both, which led me to understand them as triggered by common urges to find ways of working things (concerns and conundrums) through – to ‘figure things out’.

Ava is another friend sitting amongst us, whose name means *voice* and *sound* in Farsi. She is familiar with my study, and interrupts enthusiastically. She reminds me how during fieldwork, when paying close attention to processes and challenges of academic publishing, ‘making public’ took on a slightly different meaning when it could include the act of an artist handing over their work by sharing it with an audience. This was when I found studio visits and exhibition inaugurations particularly interesting. Ava remembers how I came to understand inaugurations as formalised rites of passage, from the position of an artwork as a part of individual and/or collective private spheres – within which it could potentially be generated grudging a capitalist logic – to it entering a more public fabric where other values of meaning, price and quality were added onto it. It was pulled tightly into a dynamic of alienation and market-driven consumption patterns, sometimes without losing other values of meaning (such as, ‘to figure things out’). This was a particular commodification process that echoed patterns of appropriation of otherness through ‘exotic’ things, facts and meanings which had characterised both modern art and anthropological

endeavours during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Clifford 1988). And as we know, more recently scholars have explored gifts and unruly commodities, analysing a neoliberal spirit of ‘commodification of everything’ (Hoag 2018; Tsing 2013), including the commodification of nature (Büscher et al. 2014), water (Strang 2020), human organs (Sharp 2000), language (Heller 2010) and intimacy (Constable 2009), and also of scholarship and higher education (Wright 2017). Without ever losing sight of the important role that anthropological theories and methods can play when we strive to find ways for understanding contemporary forms of governance and power in advanced industrial societies (Shore and Wright 2004), my study went down quite a different path as I retooled it, followed the material of an artwork made of Merino wool, and ended up studying sheep and ‘wool-worked worlds’ in Patagonia, and now recently in Lesotho.

‘Now, I have a question for you’, I say to Ricardo. ‘Do you think it is provoking to look at higher education or an artwork as potentially oscillating between capitalist and non-capitalist value forms?’ I pause and when looking up notice that we have lost Ricardo’s attention. He is now busy trying to hear that voice that speaks from behind the sage bush: ‘Poetry always remembers that it was an oral art before it was a written art. It remembers that it was first a song’ (Jorge Luis Borges).

And singing there was. Later, we all dance in Sue Wright’s garden. We move with Danish tunes and musical themes. While bouncing about under a tree with glowing apples, rhythms grab hold of complicated moves which entwine the figures of two twins, my son, Chinese-speaking scholars, other colleagues, former students, Sue herself, people from other gardens, Ricardo, Ava and other friends – a multi-ordered laughing mess with rosy cheeks. But my mind drifts off as I imagine Mrs G chuckle on the sly in her corner, cackling: there are so, so, so, so many ways to do academia.

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