**Transcript, In Conversation with Tess Lea, Policy Ontologies; Working Across Theory and Practice, 16.03.22**

**Rachael Dobson** 00:02

I am going to move over to our first speaker, Tess Lea, I'm just going to do a brief intro if that's okay Tess, to just make sure everybody kind of knows a bit more about who you are. And so Tess is an anthropologist who specialises in organisational ethnography and the anthropology of policy across housing, health infrastructure and creative industry industries and her book Wild Policy. There it is. Indigeneity, and the Unruly Logics of intervention introduces a new way of thinking about policy ontologies across both theory and practice. So what's going to happen now is that Tess is going to do a brief introduction. And then Tess and I are going to have a conversation on the themes of the book. Okay, Tess over to you.

**Tess Lea** 00:57

So, I am told by this share content thing that I've already shared content and now I can't find where it is. Okay, if you

**Rachael Dobson** 01:12

does it say anything about replace? Yes. So if you just press replace work. I love this stuff so much. Can we have a go at sharing? Replacing replacing is working? Okay, great. Oh, brilliant.

**Tess Lea** 01:37

So what can we say? Can we see? Yeah, this tiny, little, little side? And that's big for you. Yeah, great, 'cause it's tiny for me. All right. That's great. All right. Very interesting. So So thank you, Rachael. And it's, it's a thrill. Actually, I was really surprised to see the size of your baby, because in my mind, just like the book, you were, didn't even have that baby five seconds ago. And then there's this beautiful big, lovely young child, already at large in the world. That's amazing. And so congratulations on many fronts. I'd like to acknowledge that I'm speaking today, or this evening from the lands of the Gadigal. In Eora nation. Here in New South Wales, I come from the lands of the Larrakia of Urmila, otherwise known as Darwin, and I'm going to the lands of the Okanogan. In British Columbia, in seven weeks, been asked to give a very brief overview of a key method and concept that this book while policy introduces, which I call policy ecology, and it was it was driven in part by my need to actually do some of the wrestling work that I think Rachael's policy ontologies is doing this grappling with this unruly concept. The moment that you don't accept the ontic claims, the statecraft claims about what policy is sort of nailing jello to the ceiling. I'll do so by situating it at first by how anthropologists have approached policy. And this is really broad brush stuff. But pretty much when the, in the really early 1980s, the anthropologist Glynn Cochran wrote an overview of what the anthropology of policy was. And in this synopsis, he had no agony at all, none of the agony that we're sharing that we're doing, you know, a serial seminars, seminars over and trying to go on. And, you know, he had none of that. He was hyper prescriptive in his view, a policy can only be considered a policy, and I'm quoting, when it is clear that it can and will be implemented. Easy peasy Japanesey. So it's only a policy when it's clear that it can and will be implemented. So his model is, of course, premised on a notion of policy is very neat, encapsulated, and very instrumental. These container models were rejected by later anthropologists. And I mocked up this comparison site to sort of show the difference between the paradigm which hasn't been a very fixed thing, and the questioning that's happened with the probing that's come in more recent times. quite famous amongst that the people doing the probing is Chris Shore, who argues that paradigms which quote, stage policy as a process, in which one set of atomized rational individuals pursue authorised goals, while another group of analysts equally rational and atomize measure the costs and benefits and review the effects of policy are flawed. Every way so that concept is flawed in every way, from the idea of rational actors all the way through to the very idea that there is a thing called rational choice. And in sketching a new terrain for the anthropology of policy, Shore and his colleague Susan Wright emphasised instead, the messy complexity of policy, opening analyses, ethnographic and otherwise to richly textured accounts of how policies come into being and the contests that they generate, the work that they perform and their effects. A key methodological device for doing that work was to trace who gained what from the manoeuvres and how language was manipulated. I also took as my way into thinking about these issues with this latest book, a hyper prescriptive question like, which asks that who gains? What, who does what, what what, you know, can there be a thing that is good? And works well, for indigenous people in regional and remote Australia? I like the idea of a simple question, because of course, this is a this unravels from the very beginning. Who's good? What is social policy? Determined and defined how? But it took actually a lot longer for me to, to answer that question. That very simple question took a decade to say yes, of course, they can be good policy. It takes an astronomical amount of effort, and it is very fragile achievement. And no, there can't be. But that's actually not my story this evening. On the no, there can't be or we can get into dialogue about it. I'm more interested in the methodological conundrums. Why did it take so long? For me to answer this question? A key problem was that concept that the anthropology of policy had kind of finessed, which was the idea of tracking policy, as if it has a genealogy that we can capture with enough forensic work. And the reason that was difficult to pull out of is because to a certain extent, it's actually true, you can do that. You can dig into the archives, you can find minutes of meetings, you can interview people, you can interview policy people, and you can improve the people that are impacted by policies. And you can be present when things are decided you can be in meetings, you can chase speculations, you can follow impacts, and also you can trace sequels. But the issue for me is, again, this who decides thing, who decides what or where or when a policy border is. So there's a lot of presumptions behind the idea of tracing the thing. And I ended up thinking that actually what you what the idea of tracing does is a little bit like what clinicians sometimes do when they need to see what the mobilisation of something inside the body and they put an iodine tracing is an entirely artificial heuristic, but it's very diagnostic for a particular purpose. But, but the mistake is to substitute that analysis for something to do with the body and bodies in interaction with each other. And it's sort of like slither. So in all the fields that I've actually studied and acted within, which is a lot to do with Indigenous Australia, but not only their policies operate as a palimpsest of inheritances and calcifications, shaping and reshaping what can happen and what can happen next, as a unified forcefield, and as a set of fragments and stutters and abandonments as something which shapes psyches and physiques. And as something which seemingly has no intentions and no bodies. I needed an approach that understood, I think what you know, tries to grapple with what policy might be beyond the state craft claims that ask us to see it as a wise or mistaken governing tool that our analyses correct. And set to writes what I call policy ecology steps towards this for me, but it also took me ages to work out in part because I really had to unmoored policy from its usual definitional anchors, policy is ecology. In the book, my Sorry, what a when or where is a policy border policy ecology distinguishes three modes. The most recognisable is the first artifactual but I also talk about ambient and ontological policy. So artifactual policy is policy in its most risk recognised form. This is policy as a statement of intention, perhaps in the form of a funded appropriation or legislation or some officially named process. It's not just a material formulation, though. I think it's also a way of thinking and I call it artifactual. Thinking, analytically, we see artifactual policy coming into being with every call for review or an inquiry or every review and inquiry actually done hearing parliamentary debate, audit, even academic critique, oftentimes, and the desire for rectification or intervention that those calls also represent. deconstructing out of factual policies. So when you've got you know, the the act or the pronouncement or the intervention, you can pull them apart, to see how policies which is the invitation to crud, to see how these things craft subjectivities and manipulate outcomes, create haves and have nots and so on. But methods wise, and this was this is an issue for me methodologically if we only recognise policies in this artifactual mode, if we'd be as prescriptive as Cochran back in the day, with it's only this, we can miss how policies shape our everyday life, worlds balefully and benevolently, and sometimes invisibly, altering expectations and behaviours, across time and across space. And I like to think of this the little glimpse of life with empty shopping shelves from COVID disruptions, which not only exposed the precarity of our respective Moon bases, but the default expectation of uninterrupted functioning from extractive systems that we assume should operate, and mostly in our favour, regardless of the necro political violences, and what they're connected to, and so forth. I think it sort of suggests something about how we inhabit policy. It's very interesting, and that inhabitation and how it just slips into our everyday and our normative expectations. That's what I call ambient policy, which is likewise has a material material presence in the world and also something more spectrum. So this takes this ambient policy goes to policies condensate, sunk into our assemblages, qualities, as many here know, our surroundings are shaped by policy to the point where our feet have expectations about the depth of stair treads. And when that changes, we stumbled. So we orient to the world based on some of the things that are actually regulating invisibly in the background of our worlds. Finally, hauntological policy, and I know I'm whipping through this, but this is just a taster of, you know, the concepts I'm working with. It's my turn for thinking about policies that are operating psycho socially, and ghosting through time. It might be in the form of a genetic imprint, the scars of earlier policies, and in Indigenous Australia that sort of incarceration of child kidnapping of authorised rapes of land, thief's of contamination events, or it can be also manifest in the reduced expectation that people have off policies of the induced, inhabited, learnt acquired inherited sense. There's no point asking or don't go near. Don't go near because you'll be exposing yourself to something quite nasty, don't go near the police. And there's interesting anthropological work, showing how kids are taught to avoid white people. So, and I think that that's carrying forward a very clear sense, policy's past, in the present, animating the present. So fatalism, paranoia, fear, hurt, disease, phantasms, those contaminations low to no expectations, this some of the signs, not the only ones have this kind of policy and habitation, importantly, it spectral, it's visceral, and it's also deniable, it's deniable by policy proper as having an existence at all. So whilst that also can sound very dreary, I end the book while policy by also thinking through the implications, and the implications in a nutshell, aren't that easy. policy is embedded in our quotidian surrounds and our operating cultures, if it's part of the infrastructure or worlds that we occupy and move through, if it is inside our bodies, and between our bodies, if it is thus distributed by definitions, the policies for activating and otherwise, to the conditions that we are in also multiply our own potential for activating change proliferates, it requires that we stop, stop treating the state and the policy apparatus as if it is a cop or a wise king, or a wise mother, or an almighty corporate to open greater opportunities for changing what seemed like embedded determining an overwhelmingly fixed forms of inequality and rapaciousness. But to see it requires starting with the wider ecology, rather than with the artifactual version of policy. That's the that's the whistlestop tour through what policy ecology attempts to do.

**Rachael Dobson** 16:06

Thank you, thank you very much Tess. So yes, lots of I don't know how to do the applause thing that people are doing, but but I also applaud, thank you very much to us. So what we're going to do is just spend 15 minutes now, where I'm just going to use this space to ask test some questions. And like I say, if anybody has any thing that anything they want to add, then just I'm just opening up the chat functions. So I can sit. So if anybody has anything, they'd like to reflect on there, then please do so. So the thing, we've only got 15 minutes, there's so much that I could say. And also we are going to use a space at the end to kind of think through some more things. But actually, one of the things I just want to pick up on is a currently made the about how you, it really involved a grappling, I think he was saying you needed to kind of unmoor yourself in order to reach the kind of articulations I guess, and thinking that you're right that in wild policy, and in particular, to arrive at these conceptions of policy, ecology, and ontologies and ambience and so on. I suppose that I find that really interesting, because for me, the other book I have here is bleeding hearts, you know, and for me, bleeding hearts and bureaucrats for anybody that's not read it 2008 was. To me, the connections between the two books are very clear in lots of ways. And to me, it's really interesting that he says, oh, no, like I had to really kind of do lots of work to kind of get to this point where I'm thinking, but it's here, isn't it? So I'm curious as to what for you that kind of continuity with our perhaps what Bleeding Hearts did but also didn't do? Or did and you didn't see it? I don't know.

**Tess Lea** 18:07

It's really interesting. So thank you and I very impressed with how we're well read Bureaucrats and Bleeding Hearts is in your hands. They're all those tags. I've been dipping into it a little bit myself because that book also took me forever. I'm just very slow. And but I've been dipping into it thinking actually some parts of this aren't half bed. I used to look at it and think oh my god, look at these cluttered sentences and why wasn't I braver? And I should have deleted that. And I just could I could only see bad writing. But now I think Oh, actually, some of this is really like, wow, I captured something important there. But I think I was so preoccupied with being a classical anthropologist in the heart of a non classical field site. But I did very classical anthropological things. I learnt the language I did these lexicons. I really tried to understand what was going on linguistically. I looked at how do you become a bureaucrat? What are the socialisation processes for creating from a neophyte through to a polished performer? How is accomplishment measured and adjudicated, not just through the promotion system, but through people saying so and so's a really good operator. And, and, and really realising that so much reputational work is done through this cut and thrust of you know, what people classically call the the water cooler, but it's not really the water cooler. There's a whole lot of you know, and then the the the work of the mini meeting that sits outside for meetings, the negotiating work that everybody needs to do to get anything mobilised because it is a human network. And if you don't operate through the human network, then you might put up the best of ideas. And it's going to be called stone dead because it hasn't been the management term today. socialised. You know, so looking at all of those things with the curiosity really trying to make the familiar strange, you know, the anthropological adage, the familiar strange and strange familiar to the point of starting to recede things like the this aesthetic of hallways, and glass partitions and whiteboards, pearlescent lighting, really paying attention to those things, paying attention to space spaciality, the hierarchies of it, and then where people didn't go. So in remote communities, how people reproduced the bureaucratic spaces, but claimed they were now with community. But in fact, they would make bee lines for the organisation or mini prisons that were there in communities. So if you were a health, personal health professional, you'd go straight to the clinic. If you were working in in an another agency, you would go to, though your counterpart in that community, so you are basically going to bureaucratic mini-mes. That had been that may, in fact, also be indigenous. So I was so sorry, I'll stop rambling on about what I did. What I was doing was was very ethnographic. And I was conscious of doing something very deeply ethnographic in this very unusual space, very unusual village. And I wasn't thinking about some of the key terms like policy, what is it? I'll certainly showing how it was panhandled. And how, you know, the word smithing itself was just an extraordinarily complicated thing, like what people you know, groan and moan about when they look at something that's been produced by bureaucracy. You know, sometimes hyper banality and actually absolut recognizability, as a genre has been wordsmithed to an inch of its alive by multiple, multiple authors. And there's so many stages that that editing work goes through. So, you know, I captured all of that, but I wasn't thinking about what is it in its own right, like, what is this thing called policy. So it's so sure there will be continuities, but I wasn't conscious of them. So then when I went to make that set of things that I had made, that I hadn't made strange, like what is policy, I found it really difficult. The other thing that was difficult for me was starting from a refusal to do those genealogies, a refusal of method. So I every time I thought that what I was doing was chasing closure of a case study, giving it a nice narrative completeness, a beginning and an end, I would pull away and try very hard not to do that, which actually ended up as really messy, impossible to narrate object, because those conventions of narration exist for a reason. They're crutches for a reason. They enable interpretation. They enable, you know, your readers to know where they're at. So they get, you know, located by your texts, conventions. But so doing, every time I did that, I was reintroducing the neatness and the encapsulation and the borders, that I was decrying as well saying, No, this isn't right. This isn't how it actually works. But so the narrative conventions were also defining me. So there was method fieldwork, you know, issues, there were methods issues, there were writing issues, many of them that needed to be intercepted. And then of course, when you do start to come out at a thought you lose what it is. It's sad to not know what you're dealing with anymore. So it's an ongoing quest, which is why these conversations are really important.

**Rachael Dobson** 24:41

Yeah, yeah. Do you want Sorry, do you mind if I just come in? So I suppose the thing that I find, again, very interesting about the thoughts you have there is that so as you were talking, I had there's about three questions that I've got. And I was thinking oh, which One which one? Which one? Because obviously time and everything. And then I thought actually, I wonder if some of this is I wonder if these are related. Okay, so but so that's one moment. The other thing is, is that I, again, it's very interesting, that issue of locatedness, right? So you know, talking about how a genealogy of policy kind of provides kind of a type of containment, and a type of what's methodologies you say, and it provides this thing called context. And it's enabling in in certain analytic ways. And I suppose what I find interesting, and then you say, you know, this thing, you know, you kind of working with it, and it kind of seems to exploding going off in these different directions, and you're constantly trying to kind of massage it into place, in a sense, as, as a writer, you know, your writing on these kind of deeply, unsettling, unwieldy things, matter, I suppose, is a better word. But one of the thoughts that I had, as you were saying that was that in many ways, for me, one policy is so rooted in a lot of really clear stuff that provides that context for want of a better word. So two thoughts are, it's so it's rooted in, in a lot of material stuff, right? I mean, this is, this isn't a critique at all, by the way, this is what just me finding this kind of interesting. It's rooted in the material of houses and building and builders, and meetings and decisions and politicians, you know, there is a kind of material constant there. And it's rooted in John as well. You know, if I think about John's role and John's presence throughout the book, so I'm interested, I suppose, in how what you're saying there kind of raises questions for us about what can provide this sort of anchoring points, I suppose, or what gives us the kind of sense of location or locatedness that is enabling for being able to engage with unwieldy matter, or policy or ecologies. So that's one thought. I mean, the other thing that I am, as you know, from other conversations that we've had, and stuff I've shared with you, I'm also really interested in your refusal of binaries. Right? So the way that you very to me do this simply because but I think very explicitly, and what policy refuse the kind of inside outside when it comes to what constitutes policy and what constitutes the state. So as you were doing your introduction, you were also talking about, you know, we need to refuse the notion of the status culprit in a kind of straightforward way. For example, in wild policy, you talk about the notion of dirty realism, which I think is a really kind of interesting idea. And you talk about that as it relates to the fight for social and kind of racial justice. Anyway, so what combines those two thoughts for me is this idea of how you use the material as in the material in the material, the discursive, the social, the material, how you have used that in the book, and what that has actually kind of done for you, but also your resistance to those sorts of binaries, which also work to contain just as perhaps genealogy does methodologically Okay, lots of random thoughts possibly but if you can make sense of any of that

**Tess Lea** 28:55

I missed a tiny little section of what you were saying, on John Singer, and then anyway, I'll give it a go. So I might have misunderstood you because I feel like that was just at a critical moment. So just for people who haven't read the book, the the John Singer is an A*n*angu man, the CEO of Australia's oldest indigenous community controlled Remote Area Health Centre. And it's Nganampa health services which which looks after the A*n*angu Pitjantjatjara lands in the north of South Australia or the bottom of the Northern Territory. The the APY lands actually transects three different states but it's mostly north of South Australia. So really, really remote dry area. Mostly A*n*angu people. And this community controlled Health Centre has been fierce in its independence. It's been a curiosity to me that a place like, Nganampa health services is also the place where you see some of the most state like things. So some of the most, you know, clear minutes of meetings, continuity, editing, follow up of things and insistence that some decisions need to be evidence based. John is himself A*n*angu. And it was really interesting to me that he would often be asking bureaucrats for their business plans, you know, where's your business plans, where's the budget for this, this thing that you're saying we need, where's the budget for it. And it starts with this really curious thing where him say he was resisting on I was listening into these meetings, he used to sneak me into them. You know, this, I was talking about being ghost, I was a ghost on the end of the phone listening to these meetings where the, he was in this invidious position of resisting community based dialysis machines, which made him the mortal enemy of just about everybody. Why, because he could see that there was no intention to fund the recurrent costs. And that these things which he saw his death machines, was, you know, the, the, the government seeking to do the thing that you could have a bow around, and have a sign off moment and an orchestration of policy delivered, when in fact, the materiality of it was not real, you know, so that so he features in the book as a almost like a voice from the stage to the audience, as the as the person who is commenting, because he doesn't go away. Every other person gets to dip in and out of indigenous issues, but people on the ground who are there for the long haul don't. So I've actually kind of tried to show that. And if these are glimpses in four or five pages over a relationship that has been over a decade and those big nets, gathering those some of those threads, the materiality question like, you know, Why did I let go the literal materials, like pipes and toilets and houses, is because there's also not only were they a means of showing the shambolic nature of stop start crappy kinds of decision making and interventions and that, that, you know, is the is the charade, of settler colonialism in its delivery mode. But to sort of show that and how hard it is for people to turn any of that around to actually get a house out of all of those ambitions to actually have that thing turn up and become something that assembles is because infrastructural studies bought into conversation with policy analysis is really useful, because Because infrastructural studies have also already had to deal with the fact that infrastructures decompose. You know, the entropic nature of infrastructures is quite well articulated in those analyses. So there's so there's both the dump demonstration of a thing but also the metaphoric, if you like likenesses and ways to wash back into what am I trying to describe with this other thing that needs a lot of kraftwerk to materialise. That is also ephemeral and also decomposers and so on. To to try to be a bit more accurate about what the policy stuff was. The dirty realism stuff also comes from comes from thinking about infrastructures. And it's also a call out to myself, I wrote an essay called this is not a pipe. And in that essay, this is not a pipe. It was pretty I was pretty much saying well if it's not a pipe because you can't smoke it. Ala aka the treachery of images painting by Migritte if that is not a pipe because there's a literal isn't required, then this thing is pipe that's been laid down that doesn't actually connect to the effluent to dispose of it properly it to is not a pipe. And if that's not a pipe, then this isn't a house. So how many how is it that so many non houses are appearing in you know, what is the system so I guess, to trace genealogies even though I've insisted that we shouldn't I was asking those questions about materialism. You know, manifestation disappearance, chimera through material objects even being half of what they claim to be, which I think is also what is happening inside policy. And yet, we're all subjected to the desire, the same desire to have the house, to have the state to have delivery, to have things that are meaningful to have recourse to have review, to have accountability, to have a decider to have a decision point, to have a thing that can be appealed to, we want to be governed. So I think, you know, yes, they are of a piece. But it's in a mobile conversation.

**Rachael Dobson** 35:44

Thank you. Yes. And I won't say anything more, because to me, everything that you've said they're really brilliant, helpful, bouncing off points that we can really bring into our conversation later on. So just thank you very much. I think in terms of time, it's, we should probably move on to our next speaker, kylie valentine. But Tess, thank you so much for doing that talk and being so generous with your, with your thoughts and reflections there. Like I say, really looking forward to returning to base when we move on to talking as a group. Thanks for the opportunity.