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# Rappaport, Roy (1926–97)

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Roy Abraham “Skip” Rappaport was born in New York City in 1926. Rappaport’s path to a groundbreaking career in anthropology was indirect. At age seventeen, he enlisted in the US Army, and he went on to serve as an infantryman during World War II and be awarded a Purple Heart after being severely wounded by German troops. Returning from the war, Rappaport completed a BS degree in hotel administration in 1949 at Cornell University. Two years later, he opened a country inn named “Avaloch” in the Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts near the famed Tanglewood music center—a location that attracted a range of prominent people of the postwar period, including leading social scientists.

Despite his fondness for giving hospitality to friends and strangers alike, by the late 1950s Rappaport had become increasingly discontent with life as a businessman and alienated from an Eisenhower-era United States he found “bland, hypocritical, and racist” (Hoey and Fricke 2007, 582). During this period of emergent discontent, Rappaport’s cousin Robert Levy, then a psychoanalyst who later became an anthropologist at the University of California, San Diego, introduced him to Pacific Island ethnologist Douglas Oliver and Kai Erikson, the latter of whom went on to become a celebrated sociologist at Yale. Then a graduate student, Erickson became a frequent guest at Avaloch and inspired Rappaport to pursue graduate work in anthropology. Rappaport was encouraged to read Ralph Linton’s *The Science of Man in the World Crisis* (1945), in which the anthropologist cites increasing fragmentation in scientific inquiry—a concern that Rappaport would make his own. After talking to Conrad Arensberg (by then a recognized leader in the study of complex societies) at Columbia University, Rappaport committed to pursuing his doctorate in anthropology, which he finished there in 1966. His first anthropology course was an introductory class with Morton Fried in 1959; there Rappaport met his future wife, Ann, who joined in his later fieldwork. He sold his inn that year.

In 1960, Rappaport conducted his first empirical research trip, traveling to the Society Islands. While Rappaport was dissatisfied with this archaeological fieldwork—in which he worked with Kenneth Emory, who was an ethnologist at Hawaii’s Bishop Museum, and Roger Green, a Harvard archaeologist—it provided an essential start to his seminal fieldwork two years later. Specifically, his experience in the Society Islands allowed him to begin formulating a conceptual framework for holistic analysis of human populations, social and cultural structures, and the biophysical environment. This emerging human ecological approach was refined through close mentorship by anthropologist Andrew Vayda. Vayda, who was conducting an ongoing project in Papua New Guinea, encouraged Rappaport to conduct his dissertation fieldwork there. Beginning in October 1962, Rappaport spent more than a year in the Simbai River Valley of the Western Highlands. Two decades later, interested in acculturation of the relatively isolated Tsembaga Maring as contact with contemporary Papua New

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**Figure 1** Roy Rappaport, portrait with the Bismarck Range, Papua New Guinea, in the background, March 15, 1963.

Source: Reproduced with permission of the University of California, San Diego.

Guinean society quickened, Rappaport secured a grant from the US National Science Foundation to conduct nearly a year of follow-up research in the region beginning in October 1981.

Rappaport went into his dissertation fieldwork with what he described as a single-minded focus on an ethnography dedicated to tracking “energy flows” by examining practices of production, extraction, distribution, and consumption within the human population of his study (Hoey and Fricke 2007). Specifically, he considered the Maring a population in the biological sense as one component in a system of energy exchanges taking place within a bounded geographical area. In the end, these practices became the background to his larger interest in the means of ecological regulation. Upon his return to the United States in 1963, in presentations and published papers, Rappaport developed what would become career-defining themes, such as the role that ritual and religion play in ordering human societies and in structuring the relationship of populations with the natural world. Five years later, Rappaport published *Pigs for the Ancestors*, which was a breakthrough study of empirical, anthropological methodology employing systems theory to demonstrate the function of ritual in small-scale resource management. In working on his book, Rappaport’s focus grew from a largely material interest in how self-regulation might work between a given human population and its environment to one of systematic examination of the construction of meaning.

After his follow-up visit to Papua New Guinea, Rappaport released a second edition of *Pigs* in 1984 with far-reaching commentary intended to respond to scholarly criticism received in the intervening years. In his preface, Rappaport rued how

academia seemed to encourage scholars to adopt novel approaches without first assimilating past insight. In keeping with this career-defining sentiment, he informed his students at the University of Michigan, where he served as chair of the Department of Anthropology (1975–80) and taught from 1965 until shortly before his death of lung cancer in 1997, that they had a vital, integrating role to play as “synthesizers.” He felt that specialized subfields were limiting the scope of anthropological analysis to discrete bits of human experience whereas it was Rappaport’s desire to tackle the whole of the human condition. This effort is illustrated in his book *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion*, published in 1979 as an amalgam of seven essays—the product of his analysis of ritual through integrated materialist and symbolic approaches. Following in this vein and published posthumously in 1999, Rappaport’s final book summarizes the evolution of his thinking on wide-ranging themes that were his intellectual preoccupation for over thirty years. Even before his cancer diagnosis, Rappaport set a goal of grand synthesis for *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*.

In his insistence on exploring the human condition, Rappaport sought what he described as a kind of “rightness” for humanity. Among other things, he was not interested in abstract conceptions of culture, for example, but rather in developing theoretical and methodological tools that could enable people to do good in the world. For Rappaport, doing good came down to knowing what was good for people to think, and this required understanding the real-world consequences of seeing things through the lens of particular worldviews. His interest was based on a desire to reconcile apparent incompatibilities between culturally constructed religious understandings, as well as economics, which he called a “pseudoreligion,” and those immutable laws known by science to govern ecological systems that make our world possible. This grand project was born from a far more limited effort to show, through the Maring, the function of different cultural forms and their relative adaptive value in maintaining sustainable relationships within a particular environment.

In later work, Rappaport cited Stephen Toulmin’s critique of modern science for ignoring tough practical issues. Rappaport promoted an “engaged” anthropology that he reasoned is uniquely qualified to confront multifaceted contemporary problems. Principal among these were what he termed “disorders” and described as violations of contingency relationships where a way of knowing, such as economics, appropriates the dominant position of ecological principles to which it should be subordinate. Rappaport often said that humanity is a species living in terms of meaning in a world subject to law. As such, he insisted that anthropology must deal with both human meaning and laws of the natural world in order to be worthy of its subject—that is, of humanity itself.

Among numerous academic honors, Rappaport was elected to the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He served as president of the American Anthropological Association from 1987 to 1989, leading the organization toward greater engagement in policy issues. In addition to scholarly contributions, Rappaport consulted on a range of public educational and environmental projects, including the National Academy of Sciences Task Force that counseled the president on oil leasing on the outer continental shelf. He also advised the State of Nevada concerning proposed siting of a storage facility for nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain.

At the end of his life, Rappaport bemoaned how the impact of his landmark book, *Pigs for the Ancestors*, may have blinded many to his subsequent contributions. He even joked that, after a few years of fame in the early 1970s, people had simply stopped reading his work (see Hoey and Fricke 2007). Regardless of his self-deprecating remarks, today Rappaport's ideal of creating a holistic engaged anthropology—both scientific and humanistic, and committed to understanding and solving the problems that continue to challenge humanity—may be more important and sought after than ever in a world that many see as increasingly disordered and factional.

SEE ALSO: Applied Anthropology; Conflict and Security; Cultural Ecology; Ecological Anthropology; Energy Flow and Management; Environmental Anthropology; Nature, Concepts of; Policy, Anthropology and; Public Anthropology; Resilience and Complex Adaptive Systems; Ritual; Ritual and Cognition; Ritual and Religion, Evolution of; Social Anthropology: Emerging Perspectives on Human Origins; Social–Ecological Systems; Sociobiology and Anthropology; United States, Anthropology in

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