Introduction: Towards an ethnography *of* meeting

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Abstract

This introductory essay describes a novel approach to meetings in relation to broader literatures within and beyond anthropology. We suggest that notwithstanding many accounts in which meetings figure, little attention has been given to the mundane bureaucratic forms through which these work. Seeking to develop a distinctively ethnographic focus to these quotidian and ubiquitous procedures, we outline an approach that moves attention away from a narrow concern with their meaning and content. We highlight some of the innovative strands that develop from this approach through an initial survey of emergent themes across the contributing essays. Finally, the essay offers a set of provocations for rethinking through meetings approaches to bureaucracy, organizational procedure and ethos.

Contexts of Meeting

Meetings, socially and institutionally prescribed spaces for coming together, are important administrative, supervisory and managerial forms. Ubiquitous and diverse, meetings are instantiated as a range of forms including the gathering of committees and working groups, project meetings, stakeholder meetings and site meetings, annual general meetings, team meetings and ad hoc or 'informal' meetings. In the social sciences, those seeking to define

meetings in the contexts of such a broad array of activities have focused on attempting to characterise key features of meetings. Most well known is Schwartzman's definition of meetings as communicative events involving three or more people who 'assemble for the purpose ostensibly related to the functioning of an organization or group' (1989: 7). Others have pointed to the fact that meetings tend to be planned in advance, are framed by particular kinds of documentary practice and usually involve material objects such as tables and writing equipment (Asmuß & Svennevig 2009: 10-11); or have considered meetings to be defined primarily through what they seek to achieve, for example as the 'machinery by which group decisions are reached' (Richards 1971: 1; see also Bailey 1965). Historically the spread of this distinctive social form has been connected to the eighteenth century 'meeting-isation' of society (Vree 1999; see Evans this volume) – a series of linked transformations in Europe through which society was created as a distinct object of collective action, as meetings were increasingly standardised as the locus and embodiment of ideas of appropriate, transparent decision-making. The subsequent global spread of these standardised forms has been linked to colonialism. These historical factors are important, as contributors variously demonstrate, but do not in any straightforward sense exhaust the complexity of meanings, actions and relations now animated by this pervasive social form. Thus our own working definition, in some ways more expansive, in others more restrictive, is centrally ethnographic: the volume is an exploration of activities that are explicitly figured as 'meeting' from the perspective of those involved. In most cases these are activities that take an organisational form. Our heuristic definition and comparative explorations derive partly from meeting participants' own sense that even in their manifest differences, meetings work through common forms that appear to give them universal recognition. Although we may not necessarily understand their content, we mostly know a meeting when we see one.

Central to the life of organisations, institutions, and other social groups including community organisations and political movements, meetings act to order relations, understandings and knowledge and thus to influence a range of 'conjured contexts' (Abrams this volume) beyond themselves. Insofar as meetings contain and animate social worlds outside the spatially and temporally demarcated arenas through which they take place, they offer novel vantage points from which to consider a range of anthropologically significant concerns. In one sense composed through achingly, even boringly familiar routines (see Alexander and Riles in this volume), including mundane forms of bureaucratic conduct of seeming universal reach, they are in another sense specific and productive arenas in which social and material realities are understood, acted upon and re-made. Meetings, as the volume demonstrates, are not just instances that exemplify broader issues, but key sites through which social, political, temporal, spatial and material circumstances are constituted and transformed. To paraphrase author Anthony Burgess, 'all human life is here.'

Given their central role in a range of social and institutional contexts, it is unsurprising that meetings have featured prominently in a range of literatures within and beyond anthropology. Meetings are described in some classic anthropological accounts (Gluckman 1940; Richards and Kuper 1971), in particular in functionalist and structural-functionalist accounts, in which interests displayed and negotiated in meetings were often analysed in relation to questions of social organisation (a fuller account of these earlier engagements frames Abrams discussion of planning meetings). More recently, meetings have featured in a range of literatures, including in relation to documents (Riles 2006), organisations (Gellner & Hirsch 2001, Wright 1994), policy (Mosse 2005, Shore & Wright 1997), development (Englund 2006, Riles 2000, Rottenburg 2009, Li 2007; Swidler & Watkins 2009, Yarrow 2011), politics (Graeber 2009, Haugerud 1993), and science and

technology (Callon 1986, Dupuy 2009, Heims 1993, Law 1994). In various ways these literatures provide useful conceptual tools. And yet, notwithstanding some notable and significant exceptions (Moore 1977, Abrams 2011, Harper 2000, Richards and Kuper 1971, Morton 2014, Schwartzman 1989), for all the many ways in which meetings figure in accounts oriented by other concerns, meetings have rarely been the subject of sustained ethnographic attention in their own right. Even within recent work on bureaucracy (Feldman 2008; Gupta 2012; Hull 2012; Naravo-Yashin 2012) meetings have not received the kind of sustained attention that has been afforded to other kinds of bureaucratic tools and techniques, such as documents. Moreover, because attention to meetings has evolved within distinct and largely parallel literatures this has precluded sustained comparative exploration of the similarities and differences at stake in these various contexts. This volume starts from the premise that while existing accounts make important contributions to conceptualisations of the dynamics at play in 'meeting', a number of linked analytic assumptions have elided ethnographic description of key dimensions of these practices.

In mid-century literatures interests in meeting were drawn upon in relation to questions of how social order was achieved (Bailey 1965, Gluckman 1940, Richards and Kuper 1971). While the approach was not inimitable to the possibility of detailed and insightful accounts of meeting, the analytic concerns of the time elided important elements of these practices by assuming that what was important about meetings was what they set out to achieve, rather than what meetings themselves entailed. As Schwartzman (1987: 287) points out, '[t]he meeting frame itself contributes to this neglect because it suggests that it is what goes on *within* a meeting that is important' (emphasis in original). In particular, an approach premised on the assumption of social order, precluded ethnographic attention to organisation as an emergent quality of social practice (cf. Mol 2002).

More recently, meetings have figured in ethnographic accounts as elements of modern organisations and knowledge practices that have been of increasingly central focus to anthropology 'at home' (Jackson 1987). Despite the proliferation of accounts in which meetings feature, relatively little attention has been given to the mundane forms through which these work (Abrams this volume). As Hull (2012: 251) suggests, the ethnographic study of organizations was for many years animated by a sense of organizational culture that drew anthropologists to focus on informal aspects of organizations rather than the dominant formal dimensions of bureaucratic practice. We suggest that one explanation for this ethnographic intractability is, paradoxically, the very familiarity of the concepts and practices through which meetings operate. As with the documentary practices opened up by recent anthropological approaches (see for example Hull 2012; Reed 2006; Riles 2001; Riles 2004), it is not simply that the mundane can seem uninteresting to a discipline conventionally concerned with elaboration of cultural difference, but that elements of practices are elided precisely because they work through categories and practices that overlap with those of anthropologists and social scientists. Anthropologists, like other academics, routinely participate in meetings, which are central to the organisation of academic life, and to the very constitution of knowledge (a point that David Mills (2014) makes in a thoughtful discussion of the history of meetings at the Annual Social Anthropology conference; see also Silverman (2002) and Alexander this volume). This volume emerged from and was given impetus by various kinds of meeting, ranging from the regular informal meetings of its editors, to the conference at which initial papers were presented. In more or less explicit form contributors highlighted how the forms that were ethnographically at issue, were also those deployed in the drive to apprehend them.

In relation to these more recent accounts, we suggest that the contextualising logics of meeting have also been associated with ethnographic lacunae. Meetings, by definition, are socially delimited spaces that refer to contexts, interests and agendas beyond themselves. As such they provide vital contexts for the exploration of a range of substantive and theoretical concerns. Although this interpretive strategy has proved insightful, attention to the contexts generated and represented through meetings, has deflected attention from the routine procedures and forms through which context is constituted through meeting. Thus our approach joins the recent work of anthropologists of organisations and bureaucracy in suggesting that as these accounts have shown for other bureaucratic practices the forms (Lea 2002), aesthetics (Riles 2001; Strathern 2000) and material contexts (Hull 2012) through which meetings work are not incidental or subservient to the meanings and actions they produce.

Arguments from Ethnography

We have established that in various ways, ethnographic attention has therefore been deflected from key elements of meeting practices, by methodological and theoretical assumptions that anthropologists have routinely brought to bear. We suggest that recovering a more thoroughly ethnographic orientation to the topic of meeting enables understanding of these forms as situated universals (Tsing 2005), in ways that highlight the limitations of the more generalizing analyses that have often characterized the approaches of cognate disciplines. We draw particular inspiration from earlier ethnographic accounts by Schwartzman (1989a, 1989b), specifically her concern to draw out what is practically and conceptually at stake, when people claim to 'meet'. However we suggest it is significant that Schwartzman's insights have been under-developed in subsequent analyses of bureaucratic conduct, in which

texts have more routinely drawn the attention of institutional analysts, and where documents have occupied a central role as paradigmatic exemplars of the forms of knowledge these produce. In the spirit of pragmatic philosophy, we aim to recapture and recover the insights of this earlier literature in relation to specific ethnographic articulations, and to render these relevant to contemporary debates about institutional and bureaucratic knowledge.

Building on Schwartzman's accounts, we approach meetings ethnographically, seeking to understand, describe and explain how people understand their own involvements in this mundane form. In relation to the various contexts presented in this special issue, contributors seek to examine how meetings are conceptualized, experienced and practically realized through the ideas, actions and pronouncements of those involved. Unified by this common approach, our commitment to ethnography entails an effort to confront a problem inherent in other forms of anthropology 'at home' (Jackson 1987; Strathern 1987). Insofar as meetings work through concepts, forms and assumptions that have been central to academic thought and practice – in anthropology and beyond – the more routine problem of epistemic difference (how to render the 'strange' in 'familiar' terms), is confronted as an issue of epistemic over-familiarity. As instances of forms that are 'too familiar to approach with ease' (Riles 2001: 22), empirical understanding of the ethnographic entailments of meeting, involves de-centring the analytic assumptions that have rendered these invisible. While sympathetic to recent accounts in their insistence on starting from understandings of the ontological basis of others' categorical distinctions (Holbraad 2012; Viveiros de Castro 2004), our focus on meeting complicates actual or implied ideas of radical alterity as analytic-cum-methodological starting point. As contributors variously show, meetings are spaces for the alignment and negotiation of difference, and are constituted through the contextual interplay of similarity and difference. While multiplicity (for example of people,

perspectives, knowledge) is often their starting point, singularity (for example in the form of objective agreement) is often their achieved outcome (see Alexander this volume). It follows that approaches that engender assumptions about the universal basis of sociality and those that assume radical difference, are equally problematic positions from which to explore these articulations in which the relationship of similarity and difference is precisely at stake.

An ethnographic approach to meeting, defined in these terms, is not inconsistent with the selective incorporation of valuable insights from actor-network theorists – an approach which contributors to this volume engage in different, more or less direct terms – including through building on those in which meeting has figured (e.g Bruun-Jensen and Winthereik 2013; Law 1994; Mol 2002). Such approaches open up important analytic perspectives, highlighting how meetings are sites in which people and materials are assembled as networks with more or less durability and differential capacity to act. However where in these accounts the lens of 'practice' often acts to dissolve conceptual distinctions, including those that actors present, our own conventionally ethnographic concern places actors' own understandings of these practices, both as a central focus of analysis and as a source of theoretical insight. From this perspective meetings can be seen as dynamic sites in which networks are extended but also cut (Strathern 1996), in situated articulations of people, documents, technology and infrastructure. Theoretically the network allows for limitless analytic connection, but people's own understanding of meetings entail categorical distinctions, including those relating to time and space. From this perspective the ethnographies of meeting collected in this volume seek to trace how meetings are defined in ways that are simultaneously conceptual, material and social: who is included and excluded? How are the internal workings of meetings defined as distinct but related to various external contexts?

We suggest that recovering and extending the insights of earlier accounts of meeting becomes particularly pertinent in light of subsequent prevailing theoretical developments. Foucauldian approaches to institutional knowledge have generated vital insights, specifically in relation to the political implications of knowledge production, but have often been accompanied by a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2014), that can lead to ethnographically reductive accounts of institutional practice in which texts have frequently been taken as paradigmatic exemplars. As we elaborate further below, ethnographic attention focused on the mundane forms and procedures of meeting yield valuable insights, situating and extending interdisciplinary discussions of bureaucratic and institutional knowledge, and yielding new perspectives on a range of topics of broad and longstanding anthropological interest.

Meeting Perspectives: emergent themes

We suggest that ethnography of meeting is important, not only in order to more accurately describe the ethnographic ramifications of an important social form, but also as to inform wider understandings of the nature of institutional sociality and bureaucratic knowledge. Our approach marks a distinction from the more etic methodologies that predominantly characterize analyses of meetings in subjects including sociology (e.g. Boden 1994; Goffman 1961), psychology (e.g. Volkan 1991) and business studies (e.g. Asmuß and Svennevig 2009), and from the search for generalized theories that pertain across contexts. In relation to broader debates in anthropology, and to interdisciplinary accounts of meeting, we suggest that wider empirical and conceptual insights derive precisely from fine-tuned attention to the specificities involved. As a series of context-specific articulations, ethnographies of meeting draw on and reconfigure ideas, extending as they locate ideas drawn from other contexts and

theoretical concerns. The ubiquity of meeting is related to its contextual diversity, the ethnographic engagements contained in the volume draw on equally diverse literatures in seeking to explain what is at stake for those who 'meet'. The novel contribution of ethnography arises, in part, from this unwillingness to be confined by the narrow interests of specific literatures or disciplines. Meetings, as contributors to the volume demonstrate, are not just about institutional and organizational practice, but also and indissolubly pertain to issues as various as time, space, heritage, planning, animal rights and international development. At the same time, we suggest, approaching a series of issues of broader concern (within and beyond anthropology), contributors demonstrate how the lens of 'meeting' situates and therefore extends these in a range of ways.

Even in their manifest geographical and institutional differences, the meetings examined in this volume demonstrate the ubiquity of a set of common tropes through which meetings proceed. Historical accounts may help shed light on the factors that account for the initial inception and spread of formal meeting, and may even highlight embedded assumptions, but cannot explain the panoply of concerns, interests, and practices in which these forms are now integrally implicated. Our own comparative interests in meeting relate to this ethnographically significant sense in which meetings appear to those who participate in them as instances of a universal and ubiquitous organizational form. Although authors in this volume are generally focused on a specific ethnographic example, many note its presence across radically diverse and otherwise disconnected research settings.

A sense of the mundane nature of meeting is often combined with an emphasis on their power to organize, collecting persons and things in compelling ways. It may be ordinary but the meeting form also appears to elicit actions on its own terms. It is full of capacity; at

least this is what participants in meetings often wish to claim. From a variety of perspectives, contributors move beyond a concern with content and meaning of meetings, to address the question of what they do and how they act. Inspired by recent work on documents (e.g. Riles 2004) this focus leads to consideration of the formal, procedural and aesthetic qualities of meetings. Anthropologists, like other social scientists, might wish to contextualize this activity, to understand and draw out how the setting of meetings in a Melanesian jail, the Kenyan health sector or a UK heritage agency vitally matters. The specificities of these articulations are certainly crucial, as contributors to the volume make evident. However as institutional activities that generate various forms of external context (for example spatial, temporal and social), anthropologists must do more than simply replicate the contextualising moves that meetings enact. Indeed, the issue of how the 'inside' and 'outside' of meetings gets defined or constituted in the very process of meeting is another common line of inquiry that is reflected upon in a number of contributions to the volume.

The power of the meeting form to draw out capacities and relations surfaces in many contributions but is perhaps most dramatically illustrated in those instances when meeting is placed at the heart of social or political innovation and reform. Take the example of the Spanish Occupy movement provided by Corsín Jiménez and Estalella. As they illustrate from their ethnography of street gatherings in Madrid, it is the form of the assembly meeting itself that is employed to demonstrate the revolutionary potential of Occupy at the neighbourhood level. In fact, figured as a public demonstration of consensus-building and 'real democracy', the assembly form is not merely imagined as indicative but also as generative of socio-political transformation. Corsín Jiménez and Estalella report that the performance of assembly, which in many ways replicates conventional modalities of institutional gathering, is meant to capture the attention of passers-by, to draw them into local participation. Seen as

a vehicle for political expression and mobilization, this example can be easily paired with the essay by Nielsen on the political aesthetics of collective meetings in Maputo, Mozambique. But what interests in this case is the persistence and continuing efficacy of a socialist procedural form of meeting after the collapse of the ideology that birthed it (socialism ended in Mozambique in the mid 1980s). In this example, it appears that the assigned capacity of a meeting form can survive or even supersede what seemed to be its necessary context; as if socialism was a mere supplement to the mobilizing power of meeting itself.

These caveats about 'context' relate to a collective caution towards straightforward readings of meetings as subservient to broader political and economic processes. While our approach is therefore inimical to the forms of 'political reductionism' (Mosse 2005) that have often characterised critically deconstructive institutional ethnographies, papers in this volume highlight in more or less explicit terms how 'meetings' are sites of political positioning and negotiation. Through negotiations within meetings, and through the definitional boundaries through which the meeting space is circumscribed, power is not simply reproduced but also negotiated. The emphasis in the essay by Evans nicely illustrates the point. For in her ethnography of the Olympic Park Legacy Company in London, organizational meetings appear as fairly clear instruments of politics and strategy; at least from the perspective of East London local community petitioning parties. If viewed as straightforward tools for managerial exclusion or as a game closed to those without professional fluency in bureaucratic procedure, the meeting is here a heavily interest-laden object. Even so, Evans shows how meetings function as vehicles for circumscribed forms of empowerment, and do more than simply reproduce the kinds of interest they refract.

Essays by Yarrow and by Brown and Green share a similar attention. In the latter case, a study of aid delivery in Kenya's health sector draws out the constitutive role of meetings in international development. Brown and Green argue that contemporary funding mechanisms have combined with concerns around capacity building and participation in ways that render international development primarily into systems of meetings. These meetings enact the relations and senses of organisational scale that are necessary for the implementation of development. In Yarrow's ethnographic research at Historic Scotland, meetings become a venue for the alignment of various forms of expert knowledge and in particular for techniques of heritage assessment objectivity. Essays by Evans, Yarrow and Brown and Green are unified by an acute sense of the precarious status of what the procedural device of meeting can produce. Whether viewed as a managerial procedure of 'stabilization', inside the Olympic Park Legacy Company, or as a technique that helps achieve a sense of much-valued 'consistency', in Historic Scotland, or as a technique of scale-making that 'enacts an architecture' for the structuring of international development in Kenya, the message is that meetings are sites where subjects continually wrestle with resolution.

Recent accounts within anthropology (e.g. Bear 2014; Miyazaki 2004) and beyond it (e.g. Lucas 2015) make explicit the extent to which analytic assumptions about the nature of modern time have been internalised in ways that render time as a container or 'envelope' (Lucas 2015) for social process. Accordingly these elide a more thoroughly empirical understanding of the practices through which temporality is socially and materially produced. Building on this work, contributors to this volume demonstrate how time is produced through forms, procedures and practices of meeting. As many contributors highlight, meetings make time the subject matter for a gathering or the content for discussion. They are often oriented, for example, towards the achievement of resolution as a prerequisite to future social, political

or institutional action. It is in these gatherings that subjects typically address themselves to organisational strategic plans or work tasks, to the retrospective work of audit. Meetings may include imaginaries of new organisational futures in relation to past activities and understandings. As Harper (1998: 214) describes in his analysis of IMF meetings, the goal of these gatherings can be to both 'use the present to divine the future' but also to use 'reference to that future to further refine what the present might be'. In the same way, we are interested in exploring how wider temporal contexts are themselves shaped through meetings.

If meetings are therefore constitutive of time, in the elicitation of various forms of external context, they take place 'in' their own time that can be variously ordered and experienced. As several contributors identify, subjects often resent the minutes and hours that meetings take up. This includes common complaint about the quality of that time, that it can for instance be dull or boring (see Alexander, this volume). Meetings too often have very tightly designated start and end points: a meeting is usually a scheduled event and therefore expected to fit into a prescribed interval of time. In fact the meeting is a form of interaction that regularly ends abruptly, at the termination of the allotted hour. If a meeting 'runs over time,' it can mean it is badly managed or alternatively that it is working too well. Meetings also regularly have fixed cycles; they can be scheduled over a period of months or years, or, as a core part of an organisational structure and calendar, be regarded as a constant, repeating form (see Abram, this volume). Such temporalities are a recurring theme in this volume, with contributors reflecting upon the quality and issues of time that are revealed through meetings, including the relationship between enactment of particular temporalities and the strategic or relational capacities of meetings.

Meetings are often imagined as spaces in which people confront and resolve difference, whether conceived socially, epistemologically, politically or otherwise. Contributors to the volume variously show how ideas about consistency and objectivity emerge as regulatory ideals more than determining principles. This collective insight that consistency and objectivity are often after the fact of practices that do not straightforwardly conform to these ideals, destabilises widespread assumptions about the 'organised' nature of bureaucracy. Essays by Yarrow and by Keenan and Pottage demonstrate an interesting inversion. While the former explores the achievements and struggles for consistency across diverse organisational meeting forms in a Scottish heritage body, the latter focuses on the animating role of 'inconsistency' in the example of asylum case conference meetings between barristers, clients and their solicitors in London. In these conferences interaction develops around a close attention to the identification of contradiction and irregularity in the client's story; the meeting anticipates a later appeal meeting before a judge. But it also anticipates a professional ethics or legal code of conduct about coaching witnesses. Part of the challenge and tension of the case conference meeting is that inconsistency must be located without ever being spoken; barrister and solicitor are constantly walking an invisible line (the code of conduct is vaguely defined in terms of what constitutes coaching) between ethical and unethical prompting.

Building on recent anthropological accounts (see Robbins 2007, Faubion 2011, Laidlaw 2013), a focus on the ethics of meeting foregrounds the extent to which bureaucratic encounters can involve indeterminately related ethical frames that relate to complex personal decisions. If the professional ethics of legal advice are bound up with and negotiated through the actual terms of engagement between barrister, solicitor and client in the conference meeting described by Keenan and Pottage, the 'ethical' line of the Edinburgh charity

described by Reed appears more straightforward. Indeed, participants come to team meetings and other organizational gatherings as fully formed ethical subjects; their involvement in those meetings is animated by a commitment to the principles of animal welfare. The meeting form is there to service or deliver the ethical mission of the organisation. But what both these examples also throw up is the convoluted and dynamic relationship between meeting ethics and organizational roles and offices. The case conference is formally an encounter between barrister, solicitor and client; the code of conduct demands that legal officers respond professionally rather than 'personally' to the client. By contrast the client exists as an overly personal person, as someone whose biography or individuality needs to be cultivated to resolve or purify inconsistency. In the example of the Scottish animal protection charity, the expertise of role or office is valued as a facilitation of ethical goals. Participants in team meetings report from the perspective of office, and not that of individual person, but in the knowledge that this professional outlook is grounded in shared ethical sentiment. What emerges though as an increasingly live tension in these meetings is the question of whether professionalism can function to perpetuate organizational ethical goals if there is no ethical individual subject behind the office-holder. The anxiety returns us to one of the initial orienting themes of the special issue, the recurring inquiry into the terms and nature of participation itself. This includes an exploration of the constitution of attendees, the composition of those persons who act and speak in the meeting.

For one needs bodies to make meetings happen. In a very literal sense, a meeting is often not formally enacted unless it achieves quorum, a necessary number of counted persons in attendance. As a technology, meetings straightforwardly bring people together in one place, but, as an ethnographic focus on meeting highlights, the issue becomes what kind of bodies and persons are enrolled to make meetings happen. And how might they too, as

artefacts of the process of meeting, undergo transformations? In part these are classic questions about the relationship between persons, roles and offices. But whereas in the structural-functionalist heyday these questions were linked to concerns with understanding what were assumed to be mechanisms for organising and regulating society, contributors approach these as open and empirical questions. Papers in the volume reflect upon the kinds of person that meetings pre-suppose and the modalities by which people inhabit and convert these. In formal gatherings the individual person is often subsumed by the status of a technical role within the meeting (such as 'chair' or 'secretary' or 'minute-taker') or by a status as office-holder. Indeed, it is often the status of the 'personal' or individual perspective that is thrown most into doubt, or is the basis for the most subtle negotiations. With this in mind, many contributors have focused on the issue of 'who' or 'what' precisely is present at meetings and in what moments? The emphasis here is on the oscillation between personal and role perspectives, the micro-dynamics of meeting interactions between but also within the person.

These questions are intriguingly redirected in the ethnography of World Trade Organization meetings offered by Lamp. Here participants represent or speak on behalf of member nations. The issue of who is present in these formal chamber meetings and who authors the official documents that accompany them appears non contentious. However, what is contentious is the issue of the meeting's visibility or publicness. The transparency of formal meetings and official documents, it would seem, can only achieve resolution if placed in tandem with informal meetings and papers that have an unofficial status. Indeed, what is particularly thought-provoking in Lamp's example is the sophisticated, layered way in which techniques of formality and informality are elaborated by WTO participants into a whole set of principles for meetings practice. The contrast with the wholly public ambitions of the

assembly meeting of the Spanish Occupy movement could not be more marked. But the WTO example can also be fruitfully placed alongside a different essay, which examines the trans-national migration of one kind of public body project management process known as PRINCE and its accompanying meeting forms. Alexander's ethnography focuses on the reception of this apparently transferable quality assurance package, originated in Britain, in government circles in Turkey. More specifically, it describes a series of formal and informal meetings between an international lending agency, a Turkish government ministry and international consultants. Here informality or ad hoc meetings seem to constantly undercut the ambitions of PRINCE to define parameters of engagement in an abstract able way.

As Lamp's contribution most dramatically illustrates, as well as bodies meetings most obviously require documents, objects circulated before meetings, to which meetings are conventionally directed or sequenced. In fact it is documents that regularly give form to the order and time management of meetings. One need only think of the structuring role of the 'agenda', of 'discussion papers' and 'minutes' (see Abram, this volume). These papers are things participants are meant to have read before attending the meeting, things that those leading the meeting are meant to refer to throughout the course of the meeting, and at the same time one of the most obvious outcomes of that meeting. In varying ways, all contributors ask themselves what the terms of this relationship might be. Is it perhaps more accurate to view meetings as artefacts or instantiations of documentation? How does the apparently inevitable interdependency between meetings and documents materialize between and across examples? Where do ethnographic subjects themselves place the emphasis? These questions are central to any exploration of the meeting form, to any emergent sense we might have of the artefactual status of meetings.

In both Lamp and Alexander the issue of audience and the performative quality of meetings also comes to the fore. In formal WTO chamber meetings interaction is open to the gaze of a non participatory audience, in a manner in which it is clearly not in closed informal meetings between member nations. Participants of these meetings are technicians of the difference; indeed, as Lamp invites us, we need to view the constitution of formal and informal WTO meetings as almost like moieties in a dual organisation. They require each other to reproduce. In Alexander's narrative, international consultants are taken through a labyrinthine series of informal audiences with government ministers; these are also audiences for junior civil servants in the Turkish ministry, who are made to feel like these meetings are a test of their competency, set and assessed by those senior colleagues in attendance. Of course, the notion of audience also operates in the assembly meeting of Occupy, but this time through the utopian idea that the public performance of consensus-building might capture the attention of the street. It is equally present in the example of the asylum case conference. Barrister and solicitor may lead a dance around the coaching out of inconsistency in the client's story; however, all participants clearly view the meeting as a rehearsal for the next meeting, an anticipated audience with a judge.

In a very straightforward way, the issue of audience highlights the significance of a further question, asking how the location of meeting matters. Mostly, we tend to think of the meeting as a form vitally attached to office space and to encounters around a table. Perhaps anthropologists and others too often take at face value the implicit basis of institutional knowledge in universal and placeless abstractions (Yarrow this volume); the idea of meetings as 'non-spaces' may collude in this aesthetic, in ways that erase locality. But an interest in how what is known relates to where it is known and how place participates in the knowledge that is produced recurs across contributions. The examples provided by Corsín Jiménez and

Estalella and Nielsen aptly illustrate this. Meetings may take place outside, in public squares. Indeed, taking the meeting form out into the open and making it visible may be taken to reconfigure its capacities. This can also occur in less overtly politicised ways. Yarrow, for instance, demonstrates the significance of the shift for Historic Scotland staff between project meetings held in office and those 'site meetings', which take place at the location of the historic building under restoration assessment.

The issue of audience and meeting location inevitably highlight another facet of meetings, illustrated across many of the essays. Institutional gatherings usually occur as part of a series or hierarchy of meetings. In Lamp's study, there is actually an explicit WTO theory of seriality, modelled on 'concentric circles'. This is unusual, but one does not have to look far in our contributions to find other references to the interconnection of meeting forms. As already mentioned, in Historic Scotland the office project meeting and the site meeting are conceived as closely interdependent. Keenan and Pottage make clear the way one meeting can exist in anticipation or even rehearsal of another; as does Abram and Brown and Green. In Reed's essay, the team meeting seems to function as a form into which other meetings will eventually fold or at least be reported upon. Brown and Green make the point that development meetings only work because they are part of broader systems of meetings taking place at different 'levels' of organisation. Seen in this context, the truly revolutionary meeting might be the one that resists seriality or hierarchy altogether, the one-off gathering, without precedent or succession. Although several authors address the relationship between formal and informal meetings, it is perhaps fair to say that the spontaneous, unplanned and non-relational meeting is under-represented in these essays.

The final essay of the special issue looks at the limits or failure of meetings. As Riles recounts it, this may be attached to the problem of holding interest. Indeed, it is remarkable that a form so consistently identified with negative qualities such as boredom manages to sustain itself so effectively and to answer the needs of such diverse ambitions. Perhaps boredom, despite the regular efforts of meeting organisers to stimulate engagement, is precisely what makes the form so efficacious? Indeed, Riles leads us to explore the aesthetics and temporality of disengagement itself, as another effect, technique or capacity of meeting.

Final Thought: Re-thinking bureaucratic and institutional knowledge

Our account, above, is an attempt to exemplify how meetings express and resolve forms of complexity. We have attempted to characterise these in the knowledge that this complexity, being non-reducible to singular explanation of any form, cannot be adequately summarised. Each essay speaks for itself, not simply as exemplifications of a singular stable form, but as a collective sense of the social complexity of its reproduction in these terms. That people in different parts of the world or within the same locale, occupying radically different organisational forms, animated by hugely different interests and understandings, can recognise their activities as instances of a form that others share, is itself a product of the work required to make these forms appear the same.

Still, one might wonder what this all adds up to. Centrally our proposition is this: notwithstanding the many significant insights that anthropologists and others have brought to bear on questions of the nature of bureaucratic conduct and institutional knowledge, a methodological focus on texts has often been accompanied by discursive forms of analytic deconstruction, that have tended to narrow horizons of ethnographic enquiry. Amongst other

recent useful work, ethnographies of documents have helped to open-up a space for less textually reductive approaches that have resulted in a more complex picture, for example giving greater weight to the situated practices, social relations and ethical complexities that are integral to the work of organisations. Still, this de-reifying move continues to re-inscribe the importance of document as the framing context from which other actions and ideas emerge and does not displace their central role as paradigmatic exemplars of modern knowledge.

A focus on meeting is not incompatible with acknowledgement of the vital role that documents play, not least as constitutive elements of the forms and procedures through which meetings emerge. It should be evident from our account that many of the insights developed in this volume build – in some cases very directly – on this work. Collectively, however, ethnographies centred on everyday procedures and artefacts of meeting, allow us to re-centre the analytical and methodological terms of enquiry. Just as documents produce meetings, so meetings produce documents, but the logic of production looks different depending on which of these artefacts one takes as the start of enquiry. We suggest that to re-situate this dynamic through ethnographies of meeting is both to highlight a set of practices that have received limited attention in existing literatures, and to re-think what it is that documents do and signify in these contexts. Meetings do not simply exemplify a set of understandings contained within documents; rather they entail complexities that are not reducible to the textual accounts that organisations themselves produce. Many of the central themes of the volume are also central to existing accounts of bureaucracy, but the focus of meeting leads to novel insights about the generative dynamics through which these are figured. Of the various insights that flow from this methodological-cum-theoretical move to re-situate understandings of bureaucracy, we wish, in particular, to highlight the indeterminate nature

of many of meetings described within the volume. Meetings may tend towards organisation but are not *per se* organised, just as the move to resolution does not mean they are *de facto* resolved. Organisations produce systemic forms of knowledge but the basis on which they do this is not as systematic as their own textual accounts – products of those ordering processes – might lead us to believe. Meetings are often attempts to tame, narrow and contain uncertainty, including through efforts to align present and future circumstances (see Koselleck 2004). Bureaucracy approached from this perspective is less centrally about systems, structures and meanings (notwithstanding that these are vitally important), than procedures, practices and actions. Insofar as these procedures are ways of regulating action, they do not conform to a concept of 'practice' in the sense that might imply situated, specific, scattered or non-systemic conduct in opposition to formal institutional structure. Still procedures of indeterminate form are spaces of negotiation. We suggest that this thought is not only of ethnographic significance but also of some hope. For better or worse, meetings show us how organisation does not only reproduce existing structures and meanings, but may in fact be spaces that structure profoundly different futures.

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