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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 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 beyond a narrow concern with just their meaning and content. We highlight some of the innovative strands that develop from this approach, describing how the negotiation of relationships 'within' meetings is germane to the organization of 'external' contexts, including in relation to time, space, organizational structure and society. . The essay offers a set of provocations for rethinking approaches to bureaucracy, organizational process and ethos through the ethnographic lens of meeting.

'Supporting Materials': Contexts of Meeting

Before a meeting, it is usual to circulate the 'supporting materials' or the background documents that frame and contextualise the issues to be discussed. In this spirit, our opening section sets the context for the volume via a discussion of some key texts and literatures. In the borrowed vocabulary and form of meetings, subsequent sections set out our 'agenda', 'minute' key themes emerging from discussion of the essays, and set out some concluding thoughts via the guise of 'AOB' or Any Other Business.

Meetings, as prescribed spaces for coming together, are important administrative, supervisory and collaborative actions. Central to the life of formal institutions and many other organizations including community and religious associations and political movements, meetings are instantiated through a range of typical 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. Ubiquitous and diverse, these meetings act to order relations, understandings and knowledge and thus to influence a range of 'conjured contexts' (Abrams this volume) beyond themselves. To the extent that 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 Sandler and Thedvall 2016, Alexander this volume), including ordinary forms of bureaucratic conduct of seeming universal reach, they are in another sense specific and productive arenas in which realities are dramatically negotiated. 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.'

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. Most well known, anthropologically speaking, is Schwartzman's definition of meetings as communicative events involving 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) – 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 and more recently to the actions of postcolonial governments and non-governmental-organizations. This includes the prominence since the Second World War of meeting forms connected to the significant importation of models of 'good governance' and democratic speech technologies (see Hull 2010 & Morton 2014). These historical factors are significant, 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. 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 a formally recognised organisational form. We deliberately eschew the analytic question of the 'modernity' of these activities while noting the range of ways in which, more or less explicitly, meetings are associated with this term (however that is defined) in many ethnographic contexts. Finally our own comparative interests in meeting relate to the ethnographically significant sense in which organisational meetings also appear to those who participate in them as instances of a universal and ubiquitous practice.

Given their leading role in a range of institutions, it is unsurprising that meetings have featured prominently in literatures beyond anthropology. However, our approach marks a distinction from the more etic methodologies that predominantly characterize analyses of meetings in disciplines 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. It also marks, we believe, a shift in anthropological focus.

Meetings have of course been described in some classic accounts (Gluckman 1940; Richards and Kuper 1971), in particular in functionalist and structural-functionalist ethnography, in which interests displayed and negotiated in meetings were often analysed in relation to questions of social organisation. Indeed, 'traditional' or non bureaucratic forms of indigenous meeting have continued to be important objects of ethnographic description; consider, for example, the well known observations by Bloch (1975) on Merina councils or the work of Duranti (1984) on the village *fono* in Samoa. More recently, meetings, especially 'modern' meetings, have featured in a range of literatures, including in relation to documents (Riles 2006), speech acts (Atkinson, Cuff & Lee 1978, Brenneis & Myers 1984), organisations (Gellner & Hirsch 2001, Wright 1994), policy (Mosse 2005, Shore & Wright 1997), development (Brown 2013; 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, Sandler and Thedvall 2016), 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 (e.g. Feldman 2008; Gupta 2012; Hull 2012; Naravo-Yashin 2012; Bear & Mathur 2015) 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 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.

While the mid-century interest in social order did not preclude detailed and insightful accounts of meeting, the analytic concerns of that time obscured important elements of these practices. In particular, an approach premised on the assumption of social order, negated ethnographic attention to organisation as an emergent quality of social practice (cf. du Gay 2007; Mol 2002; Law 1994). Indeed, 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 to texts (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]). Of course this volume too 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 ways contributors highlighted how the forms that were ethnographically at issue, were also those deployed in the drive to apprehend them.

In more recent accounts 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. 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); this frame actively misdirects participants from a look *at* the meeting.

Thus our approach extends the recent work of anthropologists of organisations and bureaucracy in suggesting that 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.

‘Agenda’: Arguments from Ethnography

We have established that in various ways, ethnographic attention has been diverted 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), highlighting the limitations of more generalizing analyses that have often characterized the approaches of cognate disciplines. We draw particular inspiration from earlier ethnographic accounts by Schwartzman (1987, 1989), specifically her concern to understand what is practically and conceptually at stake, when people claim to ‘meet’. 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 analysis, as paradigmatic exemplars of the forms of knowledge bureaucratic practices produce (but see Sandler and Thedvall 2016). 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.

We approach meetings ethnographically, seeking to understand, describe and explain how people conceptualize their own involvements in this mundane form. In various contexts contributors seek to examine how meetings are imagined, 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. We are sympathetic to recent approaches in which ethnography is understood as a method for simultaneously understanding the ontological basis of others' categorical distinctions and for re-thinking the theoretical basis of our own (e.g. Holbraad 2012; Viveiros de Castro 2004). However 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 distinct perspectives, 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. 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. The same approach inspires Hull to assess documents as 'mediators', things that 'shape the significance of the signs inscribed on them and their relations with the objects they refer to' (2012: 253). Indeed, we may ask whether it is helpful to judge meetings in the same light, and if so, to ask how that translation or modification of 'the elements they are supposed to carry' (Latour 2005: 39) works. However, as other anthropological commentators have noted (e.g. Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2014, Candea et al. 2015), the analytic lens of 'practice' that orients many actor-network inspired accounts, often acts to dissolve and displace the conceptual distinctions that actors present. Our own more conventionally ethnographic concern, by contrast, places actors' understandings of these practices 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 in various ways meetings entail categorical distinctions, including those relating to time and space. The ethnographies collected in this volume exemplify how meetings are defined in ways that are simultaneously conceptual, material and social. Focusing on acts of cutting as much as connecting (cf. Myhre 2016) we ask: who is included and excluded? How are the 'internal' workings of meetings defined as distinct but related to specific 'external' contexts?

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 (see also Brown 2016; Mosse 2005; Yarrow 2011). As we elaborate further below, ethnographic attention focused on the ordinary forms and processes of meeting yield valuable insights, situating and extending interdisciplinary discussions of bureaucratic and institutional knowledge, and revealing new perspectives on a range of topics of broad and longstanding anthropological interest.

'Minutes': emergent themes

Our ethnographic approach focuses attention on what it takes to make a meeting; and on what it is that meetings make. In various ways, essays in this volume trace how these involve the assembly of specific people, things, materials, places and ideas. A related focus is how relationships 'within' these spaces are linked to transformations beyond them, including of institutional structure, time, space and society. Meetings, as contributors to the volume demonstrate, are not just about institutional and organizational practice, but also and indissolubly pertain to topics as various as time, space, politics, aesthetics, identify, scale, personhood and the body. Essays reveal how the lens of 'meeting' situates and therefore extends understanding of these topics in a range of ways, as we outline below.

Meetings organize, collecting persons and things in compelling ways. They work through forms that elicit actions on their own terms. Meetings are full of capacity; at least this is what participants often wish to claim. It is evident from these accounts that the forms and aesthetic devices through which meetings proceed are generative of actions and understandings of various kinds. 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 has obvious parallels with Nielsen's focus 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 resistance to understand these spaces as subservient to (configured by) broader political processes. Rather, contributors reveal, how 'meetings' are sites of political positioning and negotiation. For some, this may include, as Schwartzman (1989: 36-37) highlights, an attention to the ways in which values and social structure get 'bred into' the meeting form. However, it comes with an accompanying awareness that through talk within meetings, and through the definitional boundaries through which the meeting space is circumscribed, power is not simply reproduced but constituted in new terms. Abram makes this vividly evident in a discussion of Norwegian council planning meetings. Her account is concerned with meetings as spaces that act to order political life beyond these spaces, and highlights the precarious relationship that exists between decisions ‘within’ them and ‘actions’ beyond them. External contexts must be correctly evoked for the meeting to be effectual (i.e. it is through the performance of the former that the latter is made) and vice versa: the adoption of rituals, routines, performances and ‘consequential talk’ are crucial to the establishment of authority that validates the link between internal decision and external ‘action’. In her ethnography of the Olympic Park Legacy Company in London, Evans shows how meetings function as vehicles for circumscribed forms of empowerment, and do more than simply reproduce the kinds of interest they refract. Organizational meetings appear as fairly clear instruments of politics and strategy; at least from the perspective of East London local community petitioning parties. These meetings form mechanisms for negotiating conflicting actions concerning the same object of concern and appear as authoritative and ‘polite’ navigations of complex political fields. But at the same time, remainders of meetings leave a haunting legacy which only partly erases the antagonisms, conflicts and emotions at stake within them. The meeting is here a heavily interest-laden object.

The everyday process of meeting aims to create order and organisation of various kinds. 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 process 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 clear: that meetings are sites where subjects continually wrestle with resolution.

Institutional gatherings also usually occur as part of a series or hierarchy of meetings, figured in relation to various images of institutional structure and form. In Lamp's study of World Trade Organization meetings, there is even 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. In Historic Scotland, for instance, the office project meeting and the site meeting are conceived as closely interdependent. Keenan and Pottage, in their study of asylum case meetings, make clear the way one legal meeting can exist in anticipation of another kind; as does Abrams, highlighting how codified, standardised forms of documentation tie these together. In Reed's essay on animal welfare bureaucracy, 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 health development meetings in Kenya only work because they are part of broader systems of meetings taking place at different 'levels' of organisation.

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 the volume demonstrate how time is produced through forms, procedures and practices of meeting. Meetings make time the subject matter for a gathering or the content for discussion. They are often oriented, for example, to resolution as a prerequisite to future social, political or institutional action; or, as Riles points out in her reflections on Meridian 180, the avowedly nonpartisan multidisciplinary community of academics, practitioners and policy makers that she helped establish, towards the achievement of 'outputs'. The latter, which involves subjects addressing themselves to strategic plans or work tasks, is a generative 'fiction' of the bureaucratic meeting that for her enables gatherings not just to be retrospectively recognised as such but also to prospectively proliferate into organised series. 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'.

If meetings are therefore constitutive of time, in the elicitation of different forms of external context, they take place 'in' their own time that can be variously ordered and experienced. Notwithstanding the pervasive framing of these through modern tropes of linear time, the relationship between 'internal' and 'external' temporalities is complex and specific. As several contributors identify, subjects often resent the minutes and hours that meetings take up (Schwartzman [1989a: 159] makes the point that in this regard meetings may be taken to 'select' for certain kinds of participants: i.e. those able to spare or devote the 'time' to attend a course of meetings). This includes common complaint about the quality of that time, that it can for instance be dull or boring (see Sandler and Thedvall 2016; Alexander & Riles, this volume). Meetings 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.

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 (see also Mol 2002). 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 highlights how 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. 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 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 (see Reed this volume). 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. Essays 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. Abram highlights how roles are performed as ‘consequential talk’ that makes the orator a concrete embodiment of a corporate entity. On the same logic that establishes this authority, the status of the ‘personal’ or ‘individual’ perspective may be thrown into doubt. Whether or not people speak as one or the other may be open to debate and is the focus of more subtle negotiations. With this in mind, many contributors have focused on the issue of ‘who’ 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 legal scholar Nicholas Lamp. Here participants represent member nations. The issue of who is present in these formal chamber meetings and who authors the official documents that accompany them is uncontroversial. More 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. What is particularly thought-provoking in Lamp's example is the 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 compared with Alexander's examination of the trans-national migration of one kind of public body project management process known as PRINCE and its accompanying meeting forms. The essay 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, artefacts 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's essays, 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, by contrast to closed informal meetings between member nations. Participants of these meetings are technicians of the difference; indeed, as Lamp invites us to think, the constitution of formal and informal WTO meetings is 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.

Ethnographies of meeting also demonstrate how the mundane location of meeting matters. Mostly, we tend to think of the 'modern' 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 final essay of the special issue looks at one particular response to the perceived limits of bureaucratic gathering. Indeed, Riles tells us that the multidisciplinary and transnational collectivity of academics, practitioners and policy makers known as Meridian 180 emerged out of a historical failure of international bureaucracy and of its ambitions for the 'global meeting'. 'Gone is the faith in progress through deliberation in the global public square,' a crisis that she identifies as entangled with a more general loss of faith in technocratic expertise and in the whole project of assembling the diverse political perspectives of nation states in a singular global form. Meridian 180 aims to revive dialogue between experts but on a basis that bypasses the previous context for their dialogue, for instance as agents of the nation state. It also aims to bypass what Riles identifies as some of the dominant fictions of the global meeting, such as the pressure to reach a recognised point of 'consensus' or the drive for subjects to address themselves to 'outputs' such as concluding texts. These were meetings then that actively resisted moves to instrumentalize dialogue and the relationality that was taken to both produce and emerge from it.

However, one of the unexpected outcomes of this experiment was precisely a renewed interest in the conventionalized forms of 'output' that drove international bureaucratic meeting. Riles recounts a gradual, sometimes reluctant but growing appreciation of the generative capacity of the 'one-pager' such as the press release or policy review document. So much so that for her Meridian 180 began to also become an experiment in *doing* output. In a perhaps less knowing way, we see this shift repeated across ethnographic examples (it is worth highlighting that for Riles Meridian 180 is not principally an object of description, but a project of participatory enactment). Most obviously in the Spanish Occupy movement described by Corsín Jiménez and Estalella; for here a protest grounded in a total rejection of conventional order seizes on the bureaucratic procedure of consensus-building as an exemplification of renewal. Indeed, it is the intensification and elongation of that output, its continuing objectification across the assembly meeting that demonstrates the difference that matters. While it would be quite wrong to imagine that these bold redeployments drive participants' relationship to outputs in more ordinary bureaucratic settings (such as project meetings at Historic Scotland, council meetings in a Norwegian local authority or team meetings in the Kenyan health sector), the lesson remains. The mundane mechanisms of meetings can contain their own, sometimes unexpected, dynamic principles of action.

AOB: Re-thinking bureaucratic and institutional knowledge

It is conventional in many agenda-based forms of meeting to conclude with a call to Any Other Business or AOB. Built into the structure of a thoroughly planned or structured event (at least on paper), the category ends a meeting by quite deliberately opening a space for unplanned and unexpected talk between participants. In these discussions, it is not uncommon for the Chair to relinquish a degree of control over the direction of conversation, to let talk go. However, AOB is also part of the very technology of time management. It is the place where issues raised during the course of a meeting can be reassigned, if, for instance, a listed agenda items risks running on too long or unanticipated discussion points emerge that need to be curtailed to allow the completion of scheduled business to proceed (in reality, there is often no time to cover the issues pushed to AOB). Nevertheless the potential acknowledgement of what is not predictable or what is indeterminate remains in condensed form. While we hope that this introductory essay lays out an argument for a convincing programme of scholarly work, and presents a provocative basis for reading emergent themes across the essays, it is also hoped that readers feel the constraint of the ordering of points imposed. In every essay, we believe, there is an opening or invitation to address unexpected business.

Our account, above, has in part been an attempt to exemplify how meetings express and resolve forms of complexity. Each essay in the volume 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. From this perspective the collection contributes insights about the paradoxically specific work required to make a form appear similar across scales, contexts and places.

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. Departing from this approach recent 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 focus 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 processes and artefacts of meeting, allow us to re-centre the analytical and methodological terms of enquiry (see Riles, this volume, for a direct reflection on how her own previous work on documents might be redirected by thinking through meetings). 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. To re-situate this dynamic through ethnographies of meeting, we argue, 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 (a point perhaps emphasised by the wayward status of AOB as both a category of documentary and meeting action); 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. Indeed, although meetings exist in the background of many descriptions of bureaucratic life, they tend to serve the purpose of illustrating what are perceived as broader organizational processes. The legacy of Weber is important here; meetings may be obvious exemplifications of rational-legal routinization, but they do not dominate his account of the stabilization of charisma into modern authority structures. To a certain extent, the absence continues in the more recent rise of anthropological accounts of bureaucracy (e.g. Feldman 2008; Gupta 2012; Hull 2012; Naravo-Yashin 2012; Bear & Mathur 2015), many of which are positioned as in some way responding to the Weberian legacy. However, we also identify interesting developments in that literature; in particular, when the Weberian argument is explored through an ethnographic focus on non-governmental, perhaps unexpected forms of bureaucratization. The recent interest in describing Pentecostal organizations, especially in African contexts, has thrown up intriguing instances for example of meetings as comfortably bureaucratic-charismatic conjunctions, where respect for the recognised form and capacities of ‘modern’ meetings appears to go hand in hand with the need to ensure the active presence of divine inspiration. As Kirsch (2011) illustrates in his ethnography of the Spirit Apostolic Church in Zambia this may involve elders and prophets going into fasting and contemplative isolation before a church meeting to ensure their contribution is charged with the authority of the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, for our purposes, one sign of that presence is precisely the unexpected or indeterminate element that gets registered during the course of participants' scheduled bureaucratic meeting, and which in their minds is in some ways anticipated by the blank spaces left on the agenda form (Kirsch 2011: 216). Here, instead of being pushed to the end of a meeting through a device such as AOB, surplus talk or the unscheduled event becomes the very source of the meeting's legitimation and power; it is what ultimately gives it agency or capacity.

Of the various insights that flow from our methodological-cum-theoretical move to re-situate understandings of bureaucracy, we also wish to highlight the indeterminate nature of many of the 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). Insofar as these procedures are ways of regulating action, they do not conform to a concept of 'practice' in the sense this term is routinely deployed in academic discourse, to describe situated, specific, scattered or non-systemic conduct as distinct from formal institutional structure. Meetings are spaces where practices are formalised and forms are practiced, through performances that participate in, even as they reconfigure and extend, organisational imaginations. Still, as essays in this volume highlight, procedures of partly indeterminate form are spaces of negotiation and transformation of various kinds.

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