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# Meeting, talk and text: policy and politics in practice

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## *abstract*

Our prevailing accounts of the policy process are challenged by studies of practice as well as by practitioners themselves. This paper sets out an alternative, grounded in politics and sociology and informed by recent work in related disciplines. Drawing on the foundational work of Arendt and Goffman, it begins in the essential dynamics of the gathering, the encounter and the meeting. It considers the extent to which each is realised in talk, and in the production and reproduction of texts. Policy and politics seek to establish and maintain a 'definition of the situation' and what might follow from it: the purpose of the paper is to match theoretical and empirical accounts of this process with the activity and experience of its practitioners.

*keywords:* practice, action, interaction, production, policymaking, Arendt, Goffman

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# Meeting, talk and text: policy and politics in practice

## the problem of practice

Much of the time, in policy and politics, practice presents no problem. Practice is the object of their interest, what they work on and seek to change; what practice is, how it is formed and shaped and how it goes on, is simply assumed. By the same token, writing about policy and politics sets practice at one remove, simply not of any immediate concern. But this changes as soon as we think of policy and politics as themselves constituted in and through human action: as consisting in skilled and knowledgeable individuals in interaction with one another, making interpretations and forming judgements, working through norms and routines but always adapting to new configurations of demand, objective and opportunity. Then practice becomes problematic, both theoretically and empirically.

The theoretical problem is of long standing, and is no more or less than that practitioners fail to recognise themselves or their work in standard disciplinary accounts of the activities in which they are engaged (Colebatch 2006, Radin 2000). This doesn't necessarily make those accounts invalid, but it does mean they're very unlikely to have any effect in the world. There are of course many and varied such accounts, underpinned by a variety of knowledge forms (Tenbensen 2006), and there is an emerging sense that the best the politician or policy maker might do is draw on them severally, put them together in exercising epistemic as well as practical flexibility (Freeman 2007, Colebatch 2015). Yet where and when and how does this happen, if not 'in practice'? Where and when do the different worlds and accounts of policy making collide, and how are they reconciled? What might theories of policy and politics look like which took account of them as domains of human activity?

The empirical problem is more recent, and is a mark of an emerging disciplinary interest in the practice of policy making (Bevir and Rhodes 2010, Colebatch, Hoppe and Noordegraaf 2010, Freeman, Griggs and Boaz 2011, Wagenaar 2011).<sup>1</sup> Its basic contention is this: that for all our understanding of institutions, ideas and interests, of indicators and instruments, what happens in the process of policy making is in fact radically underdetermined, contingent on the *ad hoc* and *in situ* calibrations of human beings in interaction with one another and with whatever they have to hand, including norms, values and information as well as material things. This literature presents a powerful injunction to think about practice in terms set by practice theory, and its precepts are carefully worked out in a range of case studies. But what, cumulatively, do we learn from them about policy and politics, other than that they are realised 'in practice'? What are the practices they comprise and with which we should be concerned?

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<sup>1</sup> This interest draws on and contributes to similar work in related fields: in international relations (Adler and Pouliot 2011, Bueger and Gadinger 2014), science and technology studies (Latour 1987, Shove, Pantzar and Watson 2012), organizational studies (Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks and Yanow 2009, Feldman and Orlikowski 2011, Nicolini 2012), political anthropology (Wedel et al 2005, Shore, Wright and Però 2011, Coulter and Schumann 2012) and development studies (Li 2007, Mosse 2005). It draws on a correspondingly diverse theoretical vocabulary which includes American pragmatism, Heideggerian phenomenology, continental philosophy, discourse theory, governmentality and actor-network theory as well as practice theory more explicitly conceived.

This paper proceeds from an assumption that policy and politics are indeed grounded in practice, in action, in the 'doings and sayings' (Schatzki 2001, p 56) of human beings. The exploration which follows makes no further theoretical assumptions about the nature of action or practice, that is whether they are individual or collective, intentional or institutional, rational or norm-driven phenomena. It does not have a sense of policy and politics as activities and of actions as plural and iterative, and therefore speaks as much of interaction as action. It appreciates that action has a communicative aspect, that it occurs in response to others' actions, in terms which will be meaningful to those others and which invite interpretation and response in turn (Wagenaar 2011). In this way, it distinguishes action from behaviour.

Similarly, it allows for the use of practice as a lay term, in the common sense in which it is distinguished from 'theory' or 'policy' as above, and leaves open the question of whether such doings and sayings have the ontological status of practices, or should be conceived and understood in terms of practice theory (Reckwitz 2002, Wagenaar and Cook 2003). Its aim, instead, is pretheoretical: to outline a framework in which policy and politics might be explored as domains of human activity. In drawing on foundational theory, it indicates why we should expect politics to be conducted in and through certain modes of doing and not others. Its principal concern is not with the nature of action or practice as such, but with what kinds of doings and sayings make policy and politics and how they fit together.

In what follows I assume only that policy and politics refer to the ways in which human beings, in interaction with each other, work out how life should go on, and that they are a distinct mode of activity, specific but variable in form and function, and distinguishable from if also inherent in, other kinds of social interaction. In this sense they are a kind of meta-activity, and we might think of them as 'action about action'.

## policy and politics as action and interaction

The development of the social scientific disciplines in the course of the twentieth century found little room for the study of politics as a human, social activity. This was the effect of a *de facto* division of labour between politics and sociology, by which political scientists left problems of interaction largely to sociology, while sociologists of action and interaction have paid relatively little attention to politics.<sup>2</sup> As a result, as Burns observed (1961, p 259), 'There seems to be, in the case of political studies, no less than with other social sciences, a reluctance to develop the notion of politics as what we experience it directly to be, as a mode of doing'.

It was Hannah Arendt who, much more deliberately and explicitly than other political theorists, conceived politics as a form of action (Arendt 1959). For her, politics begins in *plurality*: 'the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world... While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition... of all political life' (1959, pp 9-10). Action, and specifically political action, is always interaction, a function of this plurality. Politics is predicated on the way in which actors 'appear' to each other, physically or phenomenologically, in 'space': 'the space of appearance... where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely

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<sup>2</sup> This necessarily simplifies a complex relationship, obviously, and risks obscuring some seminal and important work, though I think it retains sufficient validity for the purposes of this paper.

like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly' (p 177). And it is then conducted principally in speech: 'Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves' (p 4).

The grounding of politics in plurality is an epistemological as well as an ontological claim. Plurality is not only what is there, what is real, but the means by which we know what is real: 'To men the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all' (p 178). We constantly calibrate what we think we know against what others seem to know. '(W)ithout trusting in action and speech as a mode of being together, neither the reality of one's self, of one's own identity, nor the reality of the surrounding world can be established beyond doubt' (p 187).

Action, however - precisely because it is social in character - is inherently *uncertain*. It takes place in the context of other actions, which means that its outcome is intrinsically unpredictable: '(A)ction, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes. Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others' (p 169). This forms the basis of another of Arendt's key concepts, that of natality, or the possibility of newness, in the way that action invariably entails a greater or lesser degree of invention and creativity.

Arendt's account of political action begins in the encounter with others, and continues in engagement through speech. But it remains highly abstract, an ideal she was concerned to restore from classical thought. How might we also acknowledge the complexity and contingency of interaction, or what we experience as the sheer difficulty of plurality? To do so I turn from politics to sociology, to the work of Erving Goffman.

Goffman, like Arendt, begins in the encounter, noting that the encounter itself begins in uncertainty. 'When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed' (Goffman 1971 [1959], p 13). As they are for Arendt, ontology and epistemology (being and knowing) are bound together, though with a different twist.

When they meet, participants to an encounter must work out what's going on; in order to negotiate it successfully, they must develop some shared if implicit understanding of what that might mean. What's at stake in meeting, then, is what Goffman called the 'definition of the situation': 'Together the participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured' (p 21).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The phrase seems to have been used first by W I Thomas, who belonged to a previous generation of Chicago sociologists, in his *The Unadjusted Girl* (1923): 'Preliminary to any self-determined act of behavior there is always a stage of examination and deliberation which we may call *the definition of the situation*' (p 42, italics in original). This 'definition of the situation' has two aspects, one internal to the encounter and one external to it. The internal one, with which Goffman was principally concerned, has to do with what is appropriate to, or possible in, the interaction in which participants immediately find themselves. What sort of situation is this, and how should I act in consequence? What sort of situation might I make of it, and what kind of action or behaviour might it entail, both on my part and others'? The other, the external definition or account of the situation, refers to an account of the world beyond the immediate encounter, and to which it is deemed to relate in some way. Each interaction forms and depends on an image of the world beyond it. It is in this sense that the concept has been taken up in the study of foreign policy: 'State X orients to action according to the manner in which the particular situation is viewed by certain officials and according to what they want. The actions of other actors, the actor's

In this way, Goffman introduces a dynamic to the encounter, a sense of difference and potential disagreement among participants which is understated in Arendt.

So how do participants establish and maintain a definition of the situation? In *performance*, which means simply the character of action conducted in the presence of others. The encounter is 'staged', conducted consciously and deliberately with reference to those who witness it.<sup>4</sup> It is planned and prepared for, 'produced' we might say in the way a film or a play is produced, 'put on' and acted out. This makes, in turn, for Goffman's famous distinction between frontstage and backstage, or what he terms 'regions'. The space in which the encounter takes place ('frontstage') is invariably connected to another space accessible to perhaps only some of its participants. 'Backstage' is where those participants talk about what is going on frontstage: the encounter or meeting, this suggests, has an infrastructure on which its ostensible functioning depends.

In trying to bridge the gap between politics and sociology, it seems right to refer to a major figure in each discipline, Arendt in politics and Goffman in sociology. They speak, respectively, to the principal traditions of political thought: the Aristotelian (Arendt) and the Machiavellian (Goffman). While Arendt is ultimately concerned with 'power to', with the capacity of the collective, Goffman is interested in power over, 'control [over] the conduct of others' (1971, p 15). Where Arendt points to the encounter or gathering as fundamental to politics, Goffman draws attention to the politics which is fundamental to the encounter.<sup>5</sup> What if we were to think through policy and politics in the terms they set?

## modes of interaction: gathering, encounter and meeting

For Arendt, politics begins in plurality, yet the shape of that plurality, the way it is configured, remains indistinct. Reading Goffman suggests that it will comprise two, several or many people co-present, possibly in distinguishable groups, and directly or indirectly in interaction with one another. Let's think of Arendt's plurality as some form of gathering, and take Goffman's own term, the encounter: this section explores their empirical referents in ethnographic studies of politics.

The *gathering* refers to numbers of people coming together, and this being together and the expression of plurality it represents may be its principal purpose. The group, the mass and the crowd are politically significant by virtue of their very existence. The crowd (Reicher 2011), the demonstration (Barry 1999), the occupation (Writers for the 99% 2012, Cronin 2018) and the riot (Winlow et al 2015) are all essential forms of collective interaction undertaken in order to do politics and thereby influence policy. This gathering will take different forms in different contexts: in Yemen, gathering to chew Q'at serves some of the political functions of the public sphere (Wedeen 2007).

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goals and means, and the other components of the situation are related meaningfully by the actor. His action flows from this definition of the situation' (Snyder, Bruck and Sapin 2002 [1962], pp 58-9). Clearly, internal and external dimensions are intimately connected.

<sup>4</sup> 'A 'performance' may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants' (Goffman 1971, p 26).

<sup>5</sup> It may be unusual to claim Goffman for the study of politics, though his work has significant implications for our understanding of power (Jenkins 2008). And then there is the simple face validity of his writing: 'Goffman does not talk about politicians; but politicians know what Goffman is talking about', as Richard Fenno puts it (1977, p 898).

The *encounter* refers to the often unplanned, occasional interaction which takes place between individuals, the exchange that happens in the corridor, in the street, or at some social occasion. It may also take place in an office, and by appointment, and often in the margins of other, more planned and formal meetings. The encounter is an opportunity to define or redefine 'the situation', and therefore a moment in which politics gets done. Not only that, but following Goffman the encounter itself *requires* politics, necessarily entails that the situation is defined and redefined, that politics gets done.

It seems difficult to continue without some concept of meeting. Something recognizable as the gathering or meeting is a constant across societies and cultures (Schwartzman 1989), while the proliferation and elaboration of more formal practices of meeting are coterminous with the development of the modern polity (van Vree 1999): '(A)s larger numbers of people become mutually dependent over larger areas and/or differences in power decrease between people, an increased number of problems needs to be solved through talking and decision-making in meetings' (van Vree 2011, p 241).

The *meeting* is purposively constructed as an occasion for policy making, its time and place predefined, its ostensible purpose and its modus operandi known in advance to its prospective participants. Meetings are as varied as participants and their purposes, and may be defined in terms of who's there (participants), what's at issue (topic or purpose) and how their work is conducted (process). They may be exclusive, specific and formal, or open, general and informal, or almost anything in-between; a degree of flexibility, if not uncertainty or ambiguity, about their parameters may be a condition of their successful functioning. Similarly, participants, purposes and processes may change and evolve in the course of a meeting, while some meetings may be hybrid: we might think of a party conference (Faucher-King 2005), for example, as a gathering in order that encounters and meetings take place.

Meetings are common to accounts of very different political domains: Wodak's 'day in the life of an MEP' (2009) consists in a series of meetings; Healey's 'planner's day' (1992) is shaped by his scheduled meeting and an unplanned encounter; Bevir and Rhodes's 'everyday life in a ministry' (2006) goes on in and around a series of continually rescheduled meetings, while meetings are likewise intrinsic to 'being a diplomat' (Neumann 2005). The meeting is a basic element of the work of the elected representative, in the constituency (Fenno 1977, Hofstetter and Stokoe 2015) and the committee (Lutzker 1969) as well as the debating chamber, in local (Wiseman 1967, Spencer 1971) as well as national government and international organizations (Alger 1966, Riles 2001). The same holds for civil servants and public officials (Kriesberg and Guetzkow 1950), whether they are working in support of committees (Winzen 2011) or liaising with counterparts (Barnett 1997, Geuijen, t'Hart and Yesilkagit 2007), engaging with experts (Maybin 2014, 2016) or with publics (Escobar 2015). Meetings, likewise, are as central to political activity outside the formal institutions of democratic government as inside them. 'Freedom', as a study of US social movements in the twentieth century has it, 'is an endless meeting' (Polletta 2002).

But what is going on here? What is going on when these kinds of gathering, encounter and meeting are going on? From her review of the literature in political anthropology and organizational sociology, Helen Schwartzman (1989) takes two images: one is that of meeting as sense-making, and the other is that of meeting as validation. It is firstly a means of figuring out what is going on and what should be done, who we are and what we can do, and secondly a marking and endorsing, testing and reinforcing of the roles and functions of its immediate participants and other members of the community to which it refers. In that part of the related literature concerned with policy and politics, two themes stand out, and

they follow the lines of thought identified above: one takes up Arendt's sense of plurality as process, as the iteration and evolution of talk for the sake of interpretation and decision (Freeman 2008, Nullmeier and Pritzlaff 2009), while the other develops Goffman's conception of the meeting as staged performance (Ashforth 1990, Hajer 2005).

It is in the gathering, the encounter and the meeting that policy and politics are distinguished from other elements of social life. For each is in some way suspended from the world: in organizations, for example, including political organizations, the meeting interrupts the work process in order to reflect on it, to adjust or repair or develop it in various ways (Thunus nd). It is in their encounters with each other, in gathering and meeting that people interrupt the other processes of their economic and social lives in order to construct some shared sense of them, the problems that beset them and the ways they might be resolved: the gathering, the encounter and the meeting are essential forms of 'action about action', and therefore our basic modes of doing politics. Taking 'meeting' in its broadest possible sense, what politics is is what meeting does.

## talk

If gatherings, encounters and meetings are central to – constitutive of – politics, then it is talk which is central to them. They are nothing so much as occasions for talk, and different modes of interaction organize that talk in different ways.

In Arendt's work, speech and action are named separately but treated together. The suggestion, implicit as it may be, is that speech is the most prominent form of political action, that there is no action without speech, if not that speech *is* political action. 'Wherever the relevance of speech is at stake, matters become political by definition, for speech is what makes man a political being' (p 4). This means, in turn, that 'most political action, in so far as it remains outside the sphere of violence, is indeed transacted in words...' (p 25).

Goffman's late work, meanwhile, was concerned with talk, proceeding from the idea that '(W)hat we are doing in ordinary, everyday conversation... is above all to involve our listeners in our experience - to persuade them into accordance with our own views and into sympathetic regard for our experience' (Burns 1992, p 298). And if this is true of ordinary conversation, then it is the more so for distinctively political forms of talk. What matters, in Burns's reading of Goffman, is to think of talk as 'a form of acting on and interacting with what is, and with what is going on around us' (Burns 1992, p 301): the 'definition of the situation' is established in talk. Politics has a standard repertoire of 'forms of talk' (Goffman 1981): we think perhaps first of the speech, of the more recent importance of the interview, and of widely varying kinds of group discussion. These suggest a basic distinction between monologic, dialogic and polyvocal modes of interaction.

Many gatherings and meetings are organised around the making of a speech (Edwards and Reid 1994). Speeches may be structured and scripted to a greater or lesser extent (Self 2005, Neumann 2007, Nelson and Riley 2010); they may be mediated by television and radio, or supported by powerpoint (Yates and Orlikowski 2007, Stark and Paravel 2008). But even the set-piece speech has an interactional character. A speech is meaningful not because of the ideas and information it might contain, but because it is made to an audience which might hear it. By the same token, it may be interrupted by applause (Bull 2006), both sought and unsought, or by questioning, or heckling, and whether it is made at a conference (Heritage



and Greatbatch 1986) a local political meeting (Llewellyn 2005) or in Hyde Park (McIlvenny 1996). The interview, likewise, may be adversarial to a greater or lesser extent (Finlayson 2001), and/or staged just as a speech is (Jones 1993).

Other kinds of polyvocal talk are necessarily more complex, which is why some kind of order is sometimes provided for them by a formal agenda and the role and function of chair and secretary. More open, participatory gatherings and meetings tend to require more sophisticated patterns of turn-taking and facilitation (Mondada 2013). In groups which work according to the principles of consensus decision-making, meeting participants may use a recognised set of gestures and hand signals to communicate their assent or dissent. At the same time, to the extent that speech and talk presume listening, we might tell much about mode of interaction and their politics by the kind of listening that goes on (Forester 1989, Dobson 2012).

Two themes are prominent in analyses of political talk, and it is no surprise that they should directly parallel those of meeting. One is concerned with discourse, that is with what the words do, and the second with performance, that is with what people are doing by engaging in talk. Talk is about sense-making, about establishing definitions of situations, but it is also about identity, the production and maintenance of groups (Latour 2003). This holds at varying levels of formality and informality (Walsh 2004). Much of what gatherings, encounters and meetings do, that is to say, is achieved through interaction in talk.

Yet gatherings, encounters and meetings are made of more than talk. They cannot subsist simply in talk, but are predicated on the juxtaposition of human bodies in defined spaces, and on the objects they have to hand. As Mead put it: 'The mechanism of human society is that of bodily selves who assist or hinder each other in their cooperative acts by the manipulation of physical things' (Mead 1926, cit Joas 1997, p 114). Meetings have a material existence.

## text

The principal material corollary of the meeting is the text or document. Gatherings and meetings of all kinds generate inscriptions as words and numbers, images and ideas are written down, marked up and put into motion in order to be interrogated and interpreted. It is difficult to imagine politics without graffiti, petitions, pamphlets, posters, leaflets, newsletters and manifestoes; without the memorandum, briefing, proposal or press release, without the map, the plan, the budget, the bill and the file, without agendas, minutes and committee papers of various kinds. Gatherings and meetings are prompted by documents and produce documents; politics is conducted not only in action, but also on paper; interaction is organized around inscription.

Documents are the prompts, results and substance of interactions in gatherings and meetings, which is to say they are the artefacts around which those events are organized. They make collective action - collaboration and coordination - possible. A written agenda fixes the content and process of the meeting, just as posters and placards announce the purpose of the gathering or demonstration, while media reports and written minutes provide a record of what has taken place. The work of the meeting is invariably to take account of the papers and reports put to it, some of which may be accounts of other meetings.

The document is the principal artefact of politics because actions about action must be reified into representations - accounts and interpretations of the world - in order to become the object of future actions. 'The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and its continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember, and second on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things', as Arendt puts it (1959, p 83). The document is a 'definition of the situation' given material form. As such, it both stabilizes and mobilizes the sense of the gathering or meeting: it fixes what seemed in the process of its production both uncertain and elusive (which was indeed the reason it took place), and makes it available to others elsewhere (Latour 1986, Freeman and Maybin 2011). Precisely because the sense and significance of verbal interaction is so elusive and ephemeral, a document appears to give it solidity and durability. It then makes it communicable to others elsewhere, who will pick it up and read it at different times in different places. The material instantiation of talk in texts means that it can be communicated far more consistently and comprehensively than any human being could achieve in speaking to others.

What is special to the documents of policy and politics, compared with legal opinions, medical diagnoses, romantic novels or private letters is that they are about groups: they trade in generics, categories and collectives. But they are also produced in, by and for groups, which is to say that the group is produced in text as well as in talk. Documents are conceived, drafted, commented on and revised by multiple authors, working together or in series. They are then read by individuals in interaction with others, who use their interlocutors as reference points in making sense of them.

This is why reading and writing – producing documents – form such a large part of what public officials do (Apthorpe 1997, Espeland 1993, Harper 1998). But it also means that the document itself appears to do things, to do politics (Smith 1984, 2001). Cooren (2004) explains how texts 'do things' in organizations; Hull (2003) the function of the file in an Islamabad bureaucracy; Freeman (2006) 'the work the document does' in public health policy. Cambrosio and colleagues (1990) show how biotechnology policy in Quebec is developed in and through the file or dossier, a native category which forms the 'unit operation' of ministerial activity. The dossier is both physical (a folder) and abstract (a domain or issue which becomes a specifiable object of ministerial attention and responsibility), and politics is done in the iteration between the two.

The text or document, all this is to say, is an opportunity for interaction and interpretation, with all complexity and practical commitment that entails. Indeed, it may be that one of the reasons we still hold in some way to linear accounts of political and policy processes is because we retain a linear conception of the writing and reading of documents.

## summary discussion

In this brief paper, I have tried to develop a way of thinking of policy and politics in action and interaction, that is in 'what happens directly between men' (Arendt, p 9), as grounded in what was for Goffman the 'primordial real thing' (Goffman 1983, p 2). This delivers an account centred on encounters, gatherings and meetings, the purpose of which is to establish, articulate, contest and refine a 'definition of the situation' and what should follow from it. Such interactions are conducted in talk of different kinds, sometimes more and sometimes less formally organised and structured, among two or more parties. They are invariably predicated on inscriptions - documents and texts, written words, numbers and

images which fix, at least temporarily, these definitions - and produce new inscriptions of their own. Interactions and inscriptions require and entail subsequent actions in which they are picked up and acted on, interpreted, revised or ignored. What matters is who meets, who talks and who writes: who interacts with whom and on what terms, who speaks and who is heard, who records and articulates resulting representations and commitments in writing. Drawing on the ethnographic evidence in this way suggests how we might understand the doings and sayings of policy and politics as experienced by their exponents and practitioners.

It has some significant further theoretical implications, too, which have to do with our conception of political and policy processes. First, note that neither interactions nor documents are singular. Any given encounter, gathering or meeting has purpose only as part of a series of interactions of similar and different kinds; any specific document makes sense only in relation to the other documents to which it refers, explicitly or implicitly, and which in turn make sense of it. In literary theory, this phenomenon is known as the intertext, and we need some way of understanding the relationship between modes of interaction, and between instances of each mode, in a similar way. For encounters, gatherings and meetings invariably invoke other encounters, gatherings and meetings held or to be held at another time and in another place. We need then to think of the complex and extended relationships between series of interactions and sets of documents: political parties and local councils, for example, exist as networks of practices of interaction and inscription, as architectures of meeting and archives of documents. It is in this way that we might capture Arendt's sense of politics as an essentially uncertain and contingent process.

Thinking that politics consists in actions of this kind, that is in sets and sequences of communicative interaction, has profound ontological implications. It suggests that politics exists not in the interaction between things - between ideas and interests, individuals and institutions - but in the interaction between forms of interaction. 'The physical, worldly in-between along with its interests', Arendt writes, 'is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words and owes its origins exclusively to men's acting and speaking directly to one another' (1959, pp 162-3). This is why politics seems to exist in a state of perpetual motion, as the 'definition of the situation' is interpreted and contested, cast and recast from each encounter, gathering and meeting and from each document to the next (and this is why, in turn, so much of the work of 'doing politics' or 'making policy' consists in articulating, mediating, brokering, synthesizing, connecting and translating). Politics, in this account, exists only in wave form (Freeman 2012).

The purpose of the framework to invite challenge or substantiation, as well as further specification and differentiation. If it has any value, it will be for the questions it invites as for any answers it provides. I have wanted to insist on the significance of the encounter, for example, but must acknowledge that less attention is paid to it here than to other modes of interaction. This is largely because there is less to work with in the literature, which in turn may have to do with its fleeting, transient quality. By the same token, what distinguishes it from the gathering and the meeting is its undocumented status: its special value may lie precisely in its instability and lack of mobility compared to the stabilisation and mobilisation functions of the document. There may be ways, too in which we might distinguish between 'politics' and 'policy' according to their characteristic modes of interaction, though I have no basis on which to do that here.

Two principal challenges might both be tested empirically. The first asks whether the modes of policy and politics described here are being threatened or replaced by something called

'anti-politics' (Corbett 2014), or 'doing politics differently' (Flinders 2015). In many respects, doing politics differently means doing meetings differently: involving new and different participants and working according to different, sometimes innovative rules of procedure. Initiatives based in groups and communities draw on practices developed in social and religious movements; they intersect with others developed by government and other bodies as they seek to involve citizens in processes of decision making outside the established mechanisms of electoral and party politics. This has fed the development of a new 'infrastructure technology' of politics (Voß and Freeman 2016), and specifically of meeting, including citizen's panels as well as scenario workshops and consensus conferences. The role of the meeting facilitator, similarly, has emerged as a specialized, quasi-professional corollary function (Escobar 2015).

Talk about politics and much else goes on through social media, which evidence so far suggests is seen as both safer and riskier than more direct communication. What matters here, too, is participants' definition of the situation: interaction on social media, as elsewhere, is 'a contingent and socially situated achievement' (Mascheroni and Murru 2017, p3). Encounters and meetings seem to have their online correlates, yet we need to know more about the nature and dynamics of gathering in this form and on this scope and scale. Meanwhile, for all that social media were important in organizing and supporting uprisings in Cairo and elsewhere, the point and principal effect of communicating in this way was to get people - numbers of human beings - to gather in streets and squares.

A second, critical challenge is to ask the questions sociologists and political scientists must inevitably ask: 'Where is structure?', 'Where is power?' Aren't the possibilities and effects of action somehow circumscribed by factors external to the situation in which action occurs? Well yes, of course, or at least that would be my working assumption, which might be tested empirically. To this extent, looking at action is but a different way of looking at structure and power: we seek to understand action precisely in order to understand structure and power, and their origins, workings and effects. For if they have such effects, these will be on the form and content of interaction in the encounter, in gathering and meeting and what is made of them subsequently.

But we might make an equally strong assumption that structure and power are never wholly determining of what goes on: if they were, nothing would change, and we would have nothing to write about. Action is interesting because it is only loosely coupled (Goffman 1983, p 11) to structure and power. As Arendt knew, too, political work is always partly independent of, has an enduring propensity to escape the prescriptions of social and political order, which is partly why so many people think it worth doing. Without a concept of action, of practices of interaction in gathering, in the encounter and in meeting, in talk and in text, it would be difficult to understand how policy or politics - or anything else - could actually happen.

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