

# Small Places, Big Stakes

## Meetings as Moments of Ethnographic Momentum

Garsten, Christina; Sörbom, Adrienne

*Document Version*  
Final published version

*Published in:*  
Meeting Ethnography

*DOI:*  
[10.4324/9781315559407-7](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315559407-7)

*Publication date:*  
2017

*License*  
CC BY-NC-ND

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Garsten, C., & Sörbom, A. (2017). Small Places, Big Stakes: Meetings as Moments of Ethnographic Momentum. In J. Sandler, & R. Thedvall (Eds.), *Meeting Ethnography: Meetings as Key Technologies of Contemporary Governance, Development, and Resistance* (pp. 126-142). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315559407-7>

[Link to publication in CBS Research Portal](#)

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us ([research.lib@cbs.dk](mailto:research.lib@cbs.dk)) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 21. Jun. 2024



## 6 Small Places, Big Stakes

### Meetings as Moments of Ethnographic Momentum

*Christina Garsten and Adrienne Sörbom*

#### High Stakes, High Fences

It is our first day in Davos, a Swiss alpine ski resort, and it's a cold, clear winter day in late January. Having just arrived in the village the night before in order to attend the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2011, we have ventured out to explore the meeting premises. The Davos summit captures the attention of world leaders and world media. Having failed at getting a formal invitation to attend the meeting, we decided to go anyway, and to see to what extent, if any, we could participate. As we approach the meeting ground, we spot the high-wired fence that has been erected for the meeting. No chance of climbing that one, we think, for a fraction of a second. Especially not since we are dressed for the occasion in boots, skirt, and coat. At the entrance gates for the meeting compound, a small shack has been erected for the occasion. Posted before it are four guards, in grey uniforms, and with automatic guns on their shoulders. Five more guards are posted on the inside of the gates. We observe guards from the Swiss special police forces standing on the roof of the Congress Centre, dressed in camouflage uniforms, wearing masks, and heavily equipped. CCTV cameras are posted around the entrance gates and stare at us from above. In the air, Swiss Army helicopters hover, and occasionally F/A 18 Hornets, a type of combat jet, intercept their trajectories, drawing white lines across the blue sky. The soundscape created by the air security embeds the small town with a constant pattering noise. After the summit, we learn that up to 5,000 Swiss soldiers took part in the security operation that was staged for the event.

Hesitatingly, we approach the gates. One of the guards asks us for our badges. We have no badges, we reply. Then you are not allowed inside, the guard responds. Unaware of the entry restrictions, we have arranged for a first meeting with a Scandinavian participant in the meeting area. Olafur Gunnlaugson, a top-level manager from one of the corporations funding the World Economic Forum (WEF) and thus an invited participant at the summit, has agreed to meet us in the pizzeria inside the gates. We have a meeting with someone at the Pizzeria Daiano in the meeting compound, we explain. It's important that we get inside. After a few minutes of arguing, pleading,

and looking desperate, the guard decides to let us in, but only so far as to the pizzeria, and never out of his sight. Thank you very much, we exclaim, sighing with relief. As we walk toward the pizzeria, the guard keeps a steady eye on us.

Over lunch, Mr. Gunnlaugson says that he is happy that we could meet inside the gates. As he explains, going in and out of the conference center is like passing into security areas of airports after September 11, 2001. He looks a bit troubled when he realizes that we are not invited to the meeting and will not receive badges, but during lunch he explains the reason why corporate leaders should be in Davos. If you are not here, at the meeting, you do not exist, he explains. By this he means that every actor or organization with some ambition to count as important in the global business arena is there, and should make sure to be there. The meeting is a melting pot of finance, politics, research—an institutional melting pot that works. What is also important is the political dimension, he contends. (Interview Davos 2011)

The interesting conversation with Mr. Gunnlaugson makes us more at ease; it is obviously possible to do interviews and learn about and understand the event even without a badge. After the meeting, we continue our tour around the meeting premises, following the wired fence all around the area. There are a couple more entrance gateways, but nowhere is there a place where the general public can enter. Having tried our luck with the guards all around, we venture disappointingly into the village center of Davos. Unable to sport a badge that would allow us to enter and participate, we are left with a feeling of shame, being excluded, unwanted and deprived. It is an uncomfortable position to be in.

As it turned out, researching the World Economic Forum is as methodologically and theoretical challenging as it is rewarding. While getting access to the WEF headquarters was fairly easy, accessing their events, such as the meeting in Davos, was more challenging. For three consecutive years we took the train up to Davos, without getting into the conference center. What, if anything, can we learn from doing ethnography in such a small, temporary meeting place, when we do not even have access to much of what seems to be going on, we asked ourselves? In this chapter we will discuss what may be learned from studying an organization such as the WEF, to which access is restricted and where the gates to meetings may be closed whenever it suits them. We will argue that in order to understand the practices constituting meetings we will have to broaden our perspective of the meeting as a social phenomenon. The meeting as research locus and focal point of interest should not be seen as a given entity, but rather as a contingent and continually constructed social arena. In the WEF case the meeting is both a continuing organizing effort, and an arena, temporarily bounded in time and space by both organizers and participants.

The chapter is organized so as to provide a theoretical discussion of what meeting ethnography can entail in an environment where access to meetings is severely restricted, and where meetings often transgress and challenge

what appear to be the gates of the meeting. We first introduce the WEF as an organization, highlighting its interest in keeping their meetings closed. In this first section we also discuss how the WEF draws on meetings to leverage their visibility and authority as a global player. In the second section we present ethnographic vignettes from the meeting in Davos, but also from other WEF meetings in other parts of the world, in order to illustrate the role of meetings as part of a broader organizing effort. Finally, we conclude by discussing meetings in the context of the predicaments of contemporary anthropological fieldwork and ask in what sense meetings may be seen as *experiential and experimental sites*, in Rabinow's (2003) terms.

### **Meetings: Microcosms of a Larger Social Organization**

The Davos summit is surrounded by air of seriousness and hype, but it is also something like a huge cocktail party. In essence, it is a kind of human beehive, attracting and organizing a multitude of actors around its core, each contributing to the existence of the beehive community, and each disseminating its ideas and perspectives to the world at large.

Being the showcase meeting of the WEF, it is also a microcosm of the organization, set up in a small place and speaking to bigger issues: market regulations, financial crises, environmental risks, armed conflicts, and the like. With the WEF's main mission being to "improve the state of the world," meetings are one of the fundamental tools used by the organization for reaching this end. The WEF is essentially a social world of meetings—staged, circumvented, formal, organized meetings—and meetings to which access is tightly restricted. The kinds of questions that arise out of fieldwork in organizations such as the WEF are to do with access, representation, validity, and the predicaments of doing ethnography in organized settings.

At a more general level, ethnographic fieldwork in organizations such as corporations, state agencies, and international organizations often entails that the ethnographer has to rely on meetings as the primary point of access. Oftentimes, this involves doing fieldwork in workshops, at ceremonies, and at other staged, formal events (Garsten and Nyqvist 2013). In addition, such fieldwork tends to be multi-local, mobile, and discontinuous. It may not provide as much of a flavor of the different local sites and a sense of "being there" as one would wish for. The tendency in anthropology to favor the informal, the "genuine" or "authentic," as well as the spontaneous, may leave one with a lingering feeling of having to make do with second-rate material, i.e., the formal, the superficial, and the organized. Fieldwork around staged meetings, to which one even may not get full access, may, from that angle, be frustrating at first, not least because much of an organization's identity may be built up around the meetings it arranges. But as we will show, a meeting is not merely that which goes on behind the walls designated by the organizers and participants as "the meeting." It is embedded and shaped in social processes, entailing both organizing and

networking on behalf of individuals and organizations. Meeting ethnography therefore, even in the cases where one appears to have full access, also entails doing research outside the designated, labeled, meeting space. This makes the drawing of distinctions between the formal, or actual, meeting, and the informal non-meeting an ambiguous task.

With respect to the WEF, the official image, as cultivated by the organization, is not that of a bounded, inaccessible organization, but an open, transparent one. The WEF proposes an alternative form of organizing, more dynamic, inclusive, and open than that of the UN, for example, built on deliberation, participation, social development, and inclusion of “people from all walks of life.” One would think that access to organizational practices in such an environment should not be that problematic. But reality is something else. This is an organization built on “meetings” and “communities” that nurtures the idea of “safe places” where sensitive political issues can be discussed without the prying eyes of the public and the press. Meetings surrounded by Chatham House rules and informality are meant to provide a sense of trust and to be conducive to honesty and free speech for those invited. This also entails that for outsiders, access is restricted.

Thinking that most of what is relevant was probably going on inside the meeting compound, in the inner circle of events, we tried to find ways of getting in. We talked to guards, trying to argue our way in, or direct their attention elsewhere. We sought media accreditation as freelancing reporters sent out to report by Sweden’s largest daily newspaper, but failed to get it. We hopped onto buses chartered for the event, onto which only paying participants were allowed. A couple of times we managed to get into the meeting compound this way, to be driven past the guarded entrances and armed security checkpoints. But once there, we were chased off the grounds again by guards demanding to see our badges. At the onset then, we were caught up in the idea that we needed to “get inside” the formal meeting, “the meeting proper” as it were, to get access to the desired ethnographic data. This initial view was soon to be reconfigured.

Out on the periphery of the meeting staged by the WEF, there were other meetings going on. We talked to shop owners, who complained that the annual meeting did not make for good business. We chatted with drivers of meeting participants who were having dinner while waiting for the clients to call for them. These drivers told us interesting things about for example the security measurements for the meeting and the organization of these, simply by telling us what they could *not* tell us. Likewise, outside the compound, Occupy movement activists had raised tents and were preparing for a panel at the Open Forum, a session held for the larger public outside the security area, to which they had been invited by the WEF. Fighting to keep the cold out, they were gathering around the fireplaces, talking about how to best get their views across in the upcoming panel. At the peripheries of the staged meeting, thus, other meetings were taking place, partly defined by their outsideness. This outsideness itself had a lot to say about the

organization, its boundaries, what kinds of interests it protects, and the kinds of hierarchies it nurtures.

In relation to the Davos meeting there is an obvious sense of inside and outside, created by the WEF. Those invited to step inside are given the status of “brilliant thought leaders” and may proudly put their involvement in the WEF on their CVs. They make up what WEF describes as their “community of communities” (interview September 2012). Analytically, we may say that it is through these communities that the WEF is able to construct authority (Coleman 1974) and influence other organizations in its environment. The creation and maintenance of these communities takes place through chains of meetings—varying in their degree of formality and informality, size, mission, and transparency—which together constitute the expanded and elastic community of the WEF. In order to understand its workings we need to deconstruct the boundaries they set up for these meetings and the creation of communities.

### **The Indistinct Beginning and End of a Meeting**

The WEF organization rests to a large extent on the repetitious performance of the meeting as a cyclical event. Since the WEF itself is a relatively small organization, consisting of some 600 employed staff members, its manifestation as a large-scale transnational organization with a global reach depends on the continued assemblage of its members and partners into the social form of the meeting. The meeting is crucial for the construction of a sense of community. Meetings function as tools by which the organization may manifest itself as a whole for staff as well as for partners and to the outside world. Organized meetings are, so to speak, the lever that makes possible the articulation of the organizational sense of community and interest, which in turn is drawn upon to provide the organization with significance as a global actor. Lacking a mandate to influence global governance, such as that bestowed on for example the United Nations, it is partly through the meeting form that the WEF is able to have a say in matters relating to global business, governance structures, and investment opportunities.

When researching the WEF and similar organizations such as think tanks and independent research institutes, meetings thus appear as significant social phenomena. Internal meetings at the office or external meetings arranged for non-staff are integral parts of the field. In both cases there are, however, generally a number of meetings that have preceded each meeting, making them best understood as part of a process stretching over time. At times it may even be hard to find a start and end to the process. Sitting in at one staged meeting may provide a glimpse of the larger process, and sometimes that particular glimpse will catch something characteristic and significant. More often than not, however, one needs to attend more than the unique meeting (be that within four walls or not), to grasp what is going on at a larger scale. In our view, the singular meeting is to be understood as

part of a continuous process of meetings, unfolding over time. This process may also stretch across geographical and diverse social borders. WEF meetings often link one geographical location to another, by moving its location from one occasion to the next, thus connecting spots on the map into an intricate network. Furthermore, new participants are added as new types of expertise and experiences are needed, and old ones are dropped along the way. Seen from this process perspective, the often taken-for-granted view of meetings as fixed entities in time and space is decentered and challenged. In practice, we may need to retain some focus on the unique meeting, as it is projected as a focal point of attention by the organizers and sometimes also by participants, in order to trace the larger process. Ontologically, however, “the meeting,” as a research locus and focal point of interest, should not be seen as a given entity, but rather as a contingent and continually constructed social arena.

On the outside, WEF meetings are often hailed as unique events. Following the WEF in social media we see it as singling out one meeting after the other, for the media of the world to report and discuss. Moreover, many working hours are spent creating these meetings. They are significant tools for the WEF in its organizing efforts. Internally though, and in the broader context of operations, the significance of unique meetings is downplayed. Martin Lesoto, senior manager at WEF headquarters in Cologny, Geneva, says that meetings are of less importance, compared to the experience of being part of the WEF community.

So, there’s a lot of talk at the Forum, about building community. I believe that’s fundamentally what the Forum does, and why we are able to engage. The projects, what we call the insight, even the events, those are all secondary. I mean, events are crucial to building community, but I’ve always said to my team, “Don’t ever think a company becomes a partner or engages because of a project, because you know what, McKenzie, their own internal strategy team, we’re not gonna be able to outthink an external . . . you know, a team of two people working on a project can’t compete against a McKenzie or even a . . .” So for me it’s fundamentally about building community. And so the way we go about our business is essentially, in my view, we’re appealing to the fact that people, business leaders in particular in our group, need to want to and get value from being part of a larger community, where they have a chance not only in a closed room setting to talk about the critical issues facing industry and talking about business and doing what a CEO should be doing in terms of a business, but actually as leaders they don’t have many opportunities to interact with peers in a safe, quiet, confidential space. I believe that most, not all, but many CEOs, engage with the forum because we create that space where once a year in Davos, and increasingly with other executives and other activities, a chance to just convene as groups of leaders to talk about important

issues. At the same time they are doing business, making deals, perfect, but they're also learning and coming up with new insights. So, I fundamentally believe that that's been the key and a lot of what we do in my team is promote this by having rituals and symbols—you know, a chair; every year one of our communities will have a chair that's one of the CEOs . . . steering boards . . . . So we put in all the pieces that promote that this is also about creating a community, and then for me, once you've got the community that's very sticky and people don't . . . You know, people wanna be part of a group, of a community, and it also allows them to actually think outside the box and take risks as under the group. So for me, that's been the secret of the Forum is being able to create that community feeling. Not to get too philosophical but even Davos is like a community for every single person that goes, you know. I always use this analogy that, again, don't get too hung up on our content; I mean the content is important but nobody ever goes or doesn't go to Davos because of the theme—"Oh, I don't like the theme this year, I'm not gonna come."

(Interview with Martin Lesoto, September 2012)

Martin Lesoto describes the meetings of the Forum as parts of the larger process of constructing itself as an authoritative actor. The meetings are tools in these efforts and do not always carry significance in themselves. But in the larger organizing efforts they are essential in linking the diverse epistemic communities of policymaking into a larger whole (cf. Stone 2013). As Lesoto says, the CEOs he engages with in his team relate to Davos in many ways, and have many entries and exits for the same meeting. They will prepare for the meeting in various ways, by setting up meetings for doing business around the clock, as well as picking up on new opportunities during the actual week in Davos. In addition, they will draw upon the experiences after having returned back home, making plans for new projects. Thus, engaging merely with "the meeting proper" would blind us to large parts of their efforts since there is more than meets the eye to closed meetings in the conference hall. The organizing efforts of WEF may metaphorically be seen as a continued series of staged and circumscribed meetings, or as an assemblage of ongoing meetings. Meetings are in this perspective to be seen as communicative events that are embedded within a wider sociocultural setting (an organization, a community, a society) as a constitutive social form (Schwartzman 1993: 39). As Helen Schwartzman (1993: 39) puts it,

. . . such an approach is motivated by an appreciation of the idea that the world does not appear to us as formalized concepts (such as structure of culture, or hierarchy and value), but only in particular routines and gatherings, composed of specific actors (or agents) attempting to press their claims on one another and trying to make sense of what is



happening to them. In this way it is possible to see how the process of meetings contributes to the production and reproduction of the structures of everyday life.

Meetings arranged by the WEF make up a series of meetings with no clear starting point or endpoint. The boundaries of a meeting do not really *contain*, but are more often interestingly crossed (cf. Hannerz 1997). It is through the processual reenactment of meetings and their interlinking that the WEF is able to get its priorities and interests, as well as its stakeholders and partners, coordinated and organized. In other words, the meeting form works as a lever for their mission to have an impact on world governance.

### **In Transit: Before, After, and Betwixt and Between Meetings**

Even though meetings may be seen as indistinctly separated from each other, each new event still involves a degree of anticipation and expectation for organizers and participants. As participants arrive from across the world and begin to assemble at the event location, they eagerly attempt to identify one another, strike up conversations, and exchange business cards. On many occasions throughout our fieldwork, we have experienced this sense of growing anticipation, trying our best to merge into the WEF community already in the airport arrival area.

In June 2015 the WEF regional meeting on Africa was held in Cape Town. For this occasion we had contacted our main informant within the Forum asking for the possibility of hanging out at the conference site, or even better, to participate in some of the closed sessions. As expected, this request was turned down, although this time without any specific motivation. There simply was no answer to the request. As had become our routine, we went to Cape Town anyhow, with the intention of getting as close as possible to the meeting and the people attending it. In this interest we had booked ourselves into one of the conference hotels, at which some of the WEF activities would take place and where some of the participants would stay. As we anticipated closed gates at the meeting entrance, we saw the hotel as a place where we would be able to meet with participants, hop onto meeting shuttles, and participate in some of the meeting arrangements taking place at this particular hotel.

On the flight to Cape Town, with two government officials at her side on the plane from Johannesburg, Christina is drawn into a conversation regarding the WEF. The officials, a man and a woman, have never met before, but start a conversation when they understand that they are both attending the WEF meeting. The woman has additional plans for her stay, but the man intends to focus strictly on the meeting. They are both preparing their paperwork, exchanging views on the potential value of the trip. The man complains about the marginal return he expects from the meeting, while the woman appears to be more positive. "It's a waste of money," he

exclaims. She laughs, but says smilingly, “It’s a government commitment, so we should be positive.” They both continue to discuss the potential value of the meeting and the expectations they have on their missions.

Arriving at the airport we meet a group of people less ambivalent about the meeting. We stop to take some pictures at the WEF banner that has been put up and are quickly approached by temporarily hired WEF staff, asking if we are there for the Forum. After a split second of mutual hesitance we nod, and our bags are then quickly tagged, and lifted on board one of the airport shuttles that will take arriving WEF conference participants, including us, to the hotels. Waiting for the bus to fill we are asked to fill in a return form. We do this, but with some hesitance. Will they be as eager to help us on the way back, when they understand that we are there as non-invited researchers? The shuttle is soon filled with young people, clapping their hands, singing and eager to make contact. This turned out to be the “Giza hub” of Young Global Shapers, as Abdul-Badi Issa, tells us when turning towards us. He promises that we will hear from this group throughout the meeting, as they will make sure that they are heard. Sitting just in front of us, Mr. Issa turns to us, telling that he is originally from Cairo but is now situated in Lebanon, where he works as the leader for an Internet-related project sponsored by Massachusetts Institute for Technology (MIT). The aim of the project is to spread knowledge regarding the Arab world and to improve the connections between this region and the rest of the world. This particular journey is paid by the WEF, although he must fund the stay at the rather expensive Southern Sun Waterfront hotel through his project. For him, the trip to Cape Town, as well as the other trips he is doing as part of the Global Shapers network, are completely worth the time, the effort, and the funding, since they make it possible for him to meet with all these interesting people and to have all these interesting conversations “such as I am having right now with you guys.” Before every meeting, Mr. Issa tells us, he spends time going over the participant list, marking all the people he is interested in talking to. This time, though, he did not have the time to do this, since he just came from another WEF meeting in the Middle East. For him the WEF is “all about talk”; it is a platform for talk, which may involve travelling to other places and engaging other organizations and people. Asked about our own participation, we tell him that we have arrived to the meeting in Cape Town in our capacities as researchers, financed by the Swedish government. We are here to understand what the Forum is about, how it succeeds in doing what it is doing, we tell him. Mr. Issa laughs and says that he would like to understand that too! “Understanding what the WEF does, I mean . . . .” We laugh together at this perceived vagueness of the WEF. Approaching their hotel we exchange business cards and shake hands with the rest of the group, vouching to stay in contact. Staying on in the shuttle is Alexander Petrou, a Greek CEO who has taken some time off from the Greek crisis that is evolving at the time of the meeting. He enjoys coming to WEF events but is more critical than the Shapers. Just like them, though, he is interested

in our understanding of what the WEF does, because this is unclear to him, too. Arriving at our hotel, the Southern Sun Cape Sun, the three of us get off. No vouching that we shall meet again this time. Having arrived for business contacts, we are not the main target group for Mr. Petrou.

As the above examples illustrate, the passage to a meeting, social interactions before a meeting has started, may be just as ripe with meaning as the meeting itself. In the spaces before and in-between the staged meetings social connections are made, manifested, and confirmed, or proved to be of less interest. Likewise, transfers within the scope of a larger meeting, between the plethora of meetings that make up a larger conference, are often highly informative. For example, using shuttle services has also been a productive way of making sense of the annual meetings in Davos. The annual meeting is stretched out over the village, the actual conference center is but one of a large number of places that are booked either by the Forum or by other organizations in some sense related to the event. Reuters news agency, for example, uses the Kirchner Museum Davos as their headquarters; Sneider Bäckerei was rented by one of the big partners to the WEF; and Hotel Cresta Sun is booked by the Forum itself for more private conversations. If you are a very important guest you will be offered a WEF car that will take you around these sites. If not, you will need to walk or use the shuttle system, consisting of three different lines, all intersecting at the conference center. Wearing a WEF badge of any sort (e.g., press, security, or participant) will give you the possibility of hopping onto the shuttle. From a gang of skiers, taking advantage of the fact that the slopes of Davos are practically empty during this week (since all hotels are pre-booked by WEF), we soon learned, however, that sporting a badge is not needed in order to use the shuttles. Uninterested in the meeting, the skiers used them as their collective taxi, free of charge. For us, on the other hand, they constituted an extended part of the annual meeting. Here we met participants, sharing a ten-minute ride, conversing about their and our experiences of the meetings so far. In time, through conversations such as these, we got a thicker picture of why participants would come to Davos, what they were aiming for, and what did not work out as they had planned.

One of the persons we met on our first ride was Mark Spencer, a British CEO who had been to Davos many times. Looking to be the typical Davos participant, he had grey hair, was in his early sixties, and wore a blue wool coat and his participant badge crossing his immaculate tie. It was late Friday afternoon, and Mr. Spencer told us about his coming evening in Davos. "I pretend to be working. But Hotel Belvedere is the political center of gravitation for all entertainment. There are lots of parties going on. I meet a lot of people I haven't seen in a long time. I've been coming here for many years, so it's a great opportunity to meet up with people. Tonight, I'll be working hard," he said with a gleam in his eyes, "four parties, but first a business meeting at the Belvedere." For Mr. Spencer and many others like him, the business meeting that constitutes the official reason for attending the Davos

event is surrounded by other, less formal meetings. These may carry just as much significance as the business meeting, albeit from different points of view. Taken together, it is the continual process of meetings over and over again, in different forms, business and social, that endows the engagement in the WEF as a whole with meaning.

Being in transit, we have found, participants are not yet enrolled in their meeting roles, but open to share thoughts and aspirations. Airport transfers, shuttles, and other places of social interaction and communication before, after, and betwixt and between meetings, are key components in grasping the social world of the WEF as a whole. As much as the organization relies on the social form of the meeting, it also depends on the cultivation of community and aspiration that takes place in these interstitial zones. Paraphrasing Hannerz (1997: 2), we might say that the borderlands in-between the staged meetings are often “where the action is,” where novel constellations of meanings emerge and new forms of community are created. Both participants and organizers acknowledge this borderland as a key aspect of the attraction of the WEF. When setting up an event such as those in Davos and Cape Town, the Forum will always designate a special area for “networking.” This borderland is also a space in which participants reflect on their engagement and expectations, as well as on their understanding of the WEF, in a way that resembles a *para-ethnographic* stance towards the organization (cf. Holmes and Marcus 2006). Participants thus venture their own understandings and analyses of the meeting. For the ethnographer, such interstitial spaces are also valuable spaces for *polymorphous engagements* with participants (cf. Gusterson 1997), i.e., engagements that may vary in kind and topic depending on what opportunities for communication open up.

### **After Hours: Party Meetings**

As Mr. Spencer—our acquaintance from the bus ride mentioned above—hints at, the WEF annual meeting in Davos also includes partying. Most of these are not arranged by the Forum, but are thrown by corporations and/or countries. One of the parties we went to was the Russian Night, in a heated tent opposite the Arabella Sheraton, set up by “Ekaterineburg expo 2020 Bid Committee” (the Russian failed attempt to host the 2020 world exhibition). The night was cold and snow was piling up around the entrance. Disco music was pumping and at the entrance two men in black coats greeted us welcome. Once inside it took a while adjusting ears and eyes to high volume and little light. A woman in exceptionally high heels offered us a gift bag to take home as memory of the Russian Night, containing among other things a small babushka magnet and a Russian scarf. The place was only half-full, and there was a somewhat odd mix of people hanging out in the bar and at the dance floor. Either they were men in suits, wearing badges, appearing to be well over their forties. Or there were very young, very slim girls with long hair, wearing high heels and short skirts.

In our sensible “walking-around-the-field-all-day-long-shoes” we felt at odds with what seemed to be expected of women to wear at the party.

Two days later, at another type of party, we felt more at home. This time we had been invited by one of our key informants, managing director Casius Luck, to take part in the “media dinner” hosted by the WEF Saturday night during the Davos week. The dinner was held on the second floor at the Central Sports Hotel, and about one hundred people with media accreditation badges (journalists, camera men, editors, and others) filled the room. Spirits were high. Red wine in plain wine glasses was served and drunk at high speed. Soon they will serve the fondue, Beatrice Kallis, journalist from a major European news corporation, told us. She had been reporting from Davos many times and knew the routine. Mr. Luck, looking infinitely tired after this week, stepped coughing up to the microphone making a joke about how they will all have to report to him afterwards. Dinner guests were cheering and laughing at this. Luck ended the short speech by saying that they were happy to host the dinner for the media people, thanking them for their hard work during the week. More applause and cheering.

Kallis was, however, a bit skeptical about the whole arrangement. In her ordinary life at her newspaper back home, this was not the way journalists did things, clapping and cheering the guy from the organizing part. For her job as economic analyst it is important to be in Davos, she said, and she was really happy that she “inherited” the privilege of reporting from Davos from her predecessor. To her mind, the WEF is a valuable arena for business and politics. But it irritated her that the Forum tries to steer her and others’ work as much as it does. “Journalists may only take part in a small part of the meeting,” she explained, “giving us only minor access.” Kallis also said that she knows that they are checking what she writes, and she would not dream of writing something that the Forum would not appreciate. She had already, several times, had to beg her way in. She would not risk being let out. During dinner, Forum staff walked around the room, greeting and conversing with people. Apparently, this was the night when the communication staff met with the media people, checking out how the meeting had evolved from their point of view. In between pieces of bread and meat someone from Forum also approached Kallis. They talked and laughed a bit. Afterwards, though, Kallis turned to us saying that this was an informal check-up of her reporting from Davos this year. “She had not planned, you know, to check me out. She merely took the chance while talking to me anyway,” Kallis explained.

Parties are plentiful around Forum meetings. Participants see them as an integral part of the organizational experience. National identities, oftentimes turned into stereotypical representations, are showcased and marketed. Organizational community is celebrated and recognized, as well as contested and resisted. “Party meetings” are also occasions when participants may exchange stories about what actually went on during the meetings earlier the same day, what the message behind the speech given by the

chairman of the WEF was, or exchange gossip about leadership changes in the organization (cf. Noon and Delbridge 1993). They are also instances when participants may practice making use of the narrative style of the organization, and contextualize the generic vocabulary of the meeting. As such, they often serve as meta-communicative events, at which participants are given an opportunity to reflect upon and comment on “the meeting proper.”

In fact, without the “party meetings” and other less formal social events that take place in between the staged and official business meetings, the latter would lose much of their potentiality. The single business meetings may very well be the official and legitimate motive for attending events organized by the WEF and serve important communicative and organizational purposes. However, it is at the less strict and more party-like meetings that the participants may more freely discuss issues of interest, pursue their own agendas (that may not be part of their official agenda), get to know other participants and potential business partners, as well as let go of some tension and steam and just have fun. Such after-hours events are, while not part of the official agenda, interstitial spaces that are intimately entangled with “the meeting proper.”

### *Concluding Reflections: Meetings as Experiential and Experimental Sites*

Meetings, we suggest, as organized and ritualized communication events, may provide the ethnographer with a loupe, a magnifying glass, through which key tenets of larger social groups and organizations, and big issues, may be carefully observed. In meetings, political priorities, economic values, and social priorities are often condensed, played out, and negotiated, turning meetings into strategic sites from which to observe the organization at large. Meetings can turn out to be *experiential and experimental sites*, to borrow Rabinow’s expression (2003: 87), where different versions of interpretations and claims are tested and tried out. Even when access is denied or restricted, or when people do not want to talk, that in itself is indicative of what the organization is about and what is at stake in meetings. A small place like the Davos meeting ground is, in our view, one spot in the larger infrastructure of the social world of the WEF organization, and speaks to much bigger stakes, concerning participation, voice, and power in global governance matters, issues that may have large-scale implications. Thus, to return to the question raised in this chapter regarding what we may learn by doing ethnography in temporary meeting places, such as the ones constructed by WEF, without even having access to the formal meeting compounds. As we have shown, it is both worthwhile and rewarding, but in order to understand the practices constituting meetings of this nature we will have to broaden our perspective of the meeting as a social phenomenon. The conventional view of meetings as entities fixed in time and space needs

to be challenged in favor of a processual view of meetings as communicative events, continuously staged and instantiated, that are constitutive of a larger organization. As suggested above, we see meetings as part of a social process of organizing that transcends the boundaries of the meeting set by organizers for what constitutes “the meeting proper.” As for our “participation,” it has, from one angle, often been limited to being outside of the conference rooms or meeting participants after hours or in betwixt meetings. On the other hand, our presence as researchers in large, semi-public events represents the same level of participation as experienced by most of the audience. We would thus agree with Aull Davies (1999: 73–74), in contending: “This tendency of both ethnographers and readers of ethnography to evaluate the quality, and validity, of ethnographic findings on the degree of participation which an ethnographer is able to achieve is unfortunate. A more useful guide is the way in which ethnographers ground their observations in critical reflection on the nature of their participation and suitability to the particular research circumstances, and the relationship between researcher and subjects.” And these relationships are often established in conjunction with meetings—before, during, and after meetings.

With reflections on the nature of anthropological fields, concerns have been raised that anthropology may be turning away from the study of the everyday and from thick description to “quick description,” and from prolonged stays in the field to a series of flying visits, or *jet-plane ethnography* (Bate 1997: 1150). Organizational anthropologists, Bate exclaims (Bate 1997: 1150), “rarely take a toothbrush with them these days.” So, is ethnography turning towards a speculative exercise, justifying the thinnest of accounts, the most fleeting engagements and the most unsystematic of observations? We believe worries of this kind, however legitimate, to be reflective of the changing nature of our empirical fields and the kinds of engagements we are able to establish with them. Much of ethnographic fieldwork in formal organizations is conducted in meetings of various kinds, and often in less formal meetings before the formal meeting, or after the staged meeting. As the ethnographer works on getting access to the perceived core of meetings, to get “inside” of the organization, as it were, he or she often has to make do with what appears to be the peripheries of the desired field site. It is often with a sense of frustration that one engages in the “borderlands” of the field, imagining that the more valuable insights are to be gained only inside the “meeting proper.” Our experiences of doing fieldwork at the WEF, as well as in and among other organizations, have taught us that while persistence in getting full access remains worthwhile, there are as important insights to be gained from circulating the field at large. Engaging with meeting participants before or between meetings may confer a sense of what is actually at stake, what their hopes and fears amount to, and what kind of “value” is placed on different kinds of connections (cf. Mahmud 2013). Even *not* being granted access tells one a story of the organization that may be just as interesting as the one told from the inside, as it were (cf. Schwegler 2013).

In the case of the WEF this is a story of high stakes, security, and aspirations ranging from the individual interests to global governance.

Grounded ethnography in complex and organizational fields may ask more of us as ethnographers in terms of defining what actually makes up the field, what is really at stake in the field, where boundaries of formality and informality are being drawn, and what the connections between sites are. It may involve meeting the informants where they are, going “where the action is,” to meetings—whether in Brussels, Stockholm, Washington, DC, or some other locality. It means understanding the perspectives and problematizing the accounts of organizational actors, spatial and temporal, and exploring their local and translocal contexts (Garsten 2009).

In much the same vein, and in response to the anxieties related to a perceived loss of depth in ethnographic research, Marcus argues that “the standard of depth in ethnography must be understood with reference to a differently identified community of scholars in relation to subjects . . . The old question of *depth* in the creation of functionalist ethnographies is now mediated by questions of *identity*—the anthropologist’s preexisting extent of relationship and connection—to the object of study” (Marcus 1998: 246). Oftentimes, researchers doing fieldwork in and around meetings may been given the role of the responsive interlocutor, and sometimes even the role of informed interlocutor. By conversing with someone from the outside the organizational boundaries, so to speak, members of the field may also receive news from “the other side,” test out their own tentative viewpoints and talk more freely about the huge challenges ahead in working towards corporate social responsibility. Often, we have accepted these roles as best we could, wary of the preciousness of each engagement. For our informants, these encounters may well have opened an opportunity to step out of the role of “organization man” (or woman) for a moment, to be released from formal meeting format.

The WEF and other organizations like them, such as think tanks, research institutes, NGOs, and PR consultancies, are inhabited by people constantly on the move, alternating between organizations, depending to a large extent on both formal and informal meetings for their continued existence. Meetings may provide points of reference in otherwise unpredictable work practices and environments; they provide spaces of condensed meanings and dynamic tensions, zones of priorities and aspirations. Not least, meetings provide legitimate spaces for the temporary stitching together of social practices involving representatives of different interests, groups, and organizations. The policy relevance of the knowledge gained from studies conducted by think tank experts, for example, is negotiated, contested, and made legitimate “at the interface” of different types of organizations—the state administration, multilaterals, NGOs, and funding organizations (Garsten 2009), i.e., in meetings arranged and orchestrated to attract and engage participants from different organizations. In the case of the WEF, staged and formal meetings provide the lever through which the organization



may expand and gain authority and legitimacy as a global player on issues relating to global governance. At the interface, in conferences and similarly staged events, we may find that interactions and relations in the field may be quite dense around the topics at heart, that differing interests are intertwined in quite complex ways, and that ethnography in translocal fields may very well be “grounded” in its own particular way, in reference to the character of the field. Zooming in on meetings as part of a larger effort of organizing social practice allows us to see how the process of meetings contributes to the production and reproduction of the structures of everyday organizational life. Potentially then, meetings are spaces where we might gain some ethnographic momentum.

## References

- Aull Davies, Charlotte. *Reflexive Ethnography*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Bate, S. Paul. “Whatever happened to organizational anthropology? A review of the field of organizational ethnography and anthropological studies.” *Human Relations* 50(1997): 1148–1175.
- Coleman, James S. *Power and the Structure of Society*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1974.
- Garsten, Christina. “Ethnography at the interface: ‘Corporate social responsibility’ as an anthropological field of enquiry.” In *Ethnographic Practice in the Present*, edited by Marit Melhuus, Jon P. Mitchell and Helena Wulff, 56–68. Oxford: Berghahn, 2009.
- Garsten, Christina and Anette Nyqvist. *Organisational Anthropology: Doing Ethnography in and among Complex Organisations*. London: Pluto Press, 2013.
- Gusterson, Hugh. “Studying up revisited.” *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 20(1997): 114–119.
- Hannerz, Ulf. *Flows, Boundaries and Hybrids: Keywords in Transnational Anthropology*. Stockholm: Stockholm University, Department of Social Anthropology, 1997.
- Holmes, Douglas R. and George E. Marcus. “Para-ethnography and the rise of the symbolic analyst.” In *Frontiers of Capital: Ethnographic Reflections on the New Economy*, edited by Melissa S. Fisher and Greg Downey, 33–57. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Mahmud, Lilith. “The profane ethnographer: Fieldwork with a secretive organisation.” In *Organisational Anthropology: Doing Ethnography In and Among Complex Organisations*, edited by Christina Garsten and Anette Nyqvist, 189–207. London: Pluto Press, 2013.
- Marcus, George E. *Ethnography through Thick and Thin*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Noon, Mike and Rick Delbridge. “News from behind my hand: Gossip in organizations.” *Organization Studies* 14(1993): 23–36.
- Rabinow, Paul. *Anthropos Today: Reflections on Modern Equipment*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Schwartzman, Helen B. *Ethnography in Organizations*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993.

Schwegler, Tara A. "Not being there: The power of strategic absence in organisational anthropology." In *Organisational Anthropology: Doing Ethnography in and among Complex Organisations*, edited by Christina Garsten and Anette Nyqvist, 224–240. London: Pluto Press, 2013.

Stone, Diane. "Shades of grey: The World Bank, knowledge networks and linked ecologies of academic engagement." *Global Networks* 13(2013): 241–260.