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# The social organisation of epistemology in macroeconomic policy work: the case of the IMF

*Richard H. R. Harper*

**Abstract:** This paper reports an ethnographic study of work practices in the IMF, and IMF mission activity in particular. It will show how this work combines arithmetic, econometric and meeting skills with the adroit management of social processes that transform 'incomplete' or 'ambiguous numbers' into socially validated and hence 'objective for practical purposes' data. These data form the basis of epistemic certainty in the analytical work undertaken, and though this certainty is socially framed, it is treated as sufficient for substantive, robust and 'real world' macroeconomic policy making.

**Keywords:** work practices, macroeconomics, IMF, missions, ritual

## Introduction

Over the past twenty years or so anthropology has gone through many changes. These derive from a loss of confidence, amongst anthropologists themselves, with their concern for 'Otherness'. Questions about *which others*, being looked at for *what purposes* and seen from *what perspective*, have come to subsume any hitherto agreed body politic of ideas and topics. Much of this has derived from the publication of Clifford and Marcus's *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Prior to this period, Otherness was simply defined as small scale societies remote from the urban experience of the West.

Anthropology has tried to deal with this now almost compulsive doubt in a number ways. One has been to make the personal voyage of the anthropologist the subject of remark and analysis. Here the conviction that the physical presence of the anthropologist, as an *ethnographer*, as a fieldworker of especial capacity making for his or her own 'Otherness', has been made a topic of its own. This view

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is represented in the recent work of David Mosse, for example (2006: 935-956). Another has been to assume that Otherness should be subsumed into a concern with the political ideologies which are thought to be the ultimate bedrock of all 'theoretical reason and technical behaviour', whether it be of those in the developing world (the traditional location of Others) or here, in the West (Atlani-Duault, 2007: p9). In this view, the anthropological task is to distil all observable behaviour into the ideologies that underscore them; Otherness is merely a political category. A third response has been to focus on the skills (or practices) of people, whatever those skills might be and wherever they might be deployed. This approach makes everyday skills in work, whether that work be in the developing world or in highly advanced institutional and corporate settings in the West, the topic of anthropological inquiry. Though this was first developed by the sociologist Harold Garfinkel long before anthropology started worrying about Otherness (in his *Studies in Ethnomethodology* of 1967, in fact) it was eventually taken up in anthropology by the likes of Lucy Suchman with the publication of her book *Plans and Situated Action* (1987). This latter approach to anthropology has come to produce a set of inquiries called *workpractice* studies. These now constitute a substantive body of research that is almost independent of the rest of anthropology – since it has implications and insights that are of interest to researchers outside of that discipline, such as computer systems designers and organisational process managers, amongst others. Exemplars of workpractice studies include Heath, et al, (2000) and illustrations of how such studies are used for computer system design include Sellen & Harper, (2002).

I mention these different approaches to anthropological inquiry not to presage a debate about what anthropology is or ought to be, but to set up the motivation for and the analytic bent of an ethnographic and hence, in character, anthropological study of the International Monetary Fund, the IMF, presented here, in this paper. This examination takes the last view on what anthropology might concern itself with – one that focuses on workpractices. Hence, instead of looking at, say, the political ideologies that underscore the technical reason of the IMF's staff, this study seeks to describe the practical skills, actions and procedures that they use. It explores and analyses how this work gets organised, its social process if you like, and how the activities within its auspices consist of interdependent practices of reason and practical skill, where abstract concepts constitutive of professional ability get applied in contexts of 'real world' action.

The IMF is a particularly interesting place to approach from this point of view. For one thing, the IMF has regularly been examined from other perspectives – from the one that critiques its political ideology, for example (in addition to Altani-Duault's work see also Ferguson, 1990). But it has never been examined for its actual work. Indeed, the organisation of its work is completely uninvestigated by anthropology or by any discipline. That this is so is all the more surprising given that its work is bound to be made up of more than the simple doing of macroeconomics (if one can put it that way). In addition to this, the work (whatever forms it takes) is of enormous consequence to the world at large – all the more so given the recent instability of the world financial system in which the IMF is meant to be the centrepiece. Despite all this, what the IMF's work actually consists of, the practical doings of its staff, has remained something of a mystery.

It was in this context that the research for this paper was undertaken – with the idea of uncovering a work setting hitherto neglected, though it was also motivated by a concern for systems design. Leaving that latter concern aside, the study itself sought to examine a whole range of IMF workpractices, from archiving to scheduling, from administration to the exercise of professional judgement (see Harper, 1997). This paper will focus on three key properties of its *mission* process. The mission process has particular characteristics that have never been described. Description of them will also provide a good insight into the IMF's over all nature too, since missions are essential to the institution's overall work. In overview, the three characteristics in question are as follows.

First, the broad set of skills and techniques used on IMF missions enable IMF staff to do their work *come what may*, i.e. irrespective of the incompleteness, surfeit, ambiguity or peculiarity of the data they have access to. Moreover, this work is done disregarding (more or less) any contingencies they have to deal with such as loss of data or time constraints. That this is so has all sorts of implications for the kinds of skills that the IMF's staff need to deploy, their practical approach to a 'science in the wild' that is the Fund's policy work.

Second, the mission process entails not simply collecting enough and correct data. A mission team has also to create an analytic perspective which determines what is relevant and what is not within the canvass of the data that are available. This perspective has to be *agreeable to all those concerned*. IMF staff will find that not all the persons involved in the process agree about what is the 'right set' of data to

be used for any particular policy decisions. Mission activity entails negotiations whereby decisions about which numbers are to be used is agreed jointly by the IMF staff and the authorities of the country in question. This process is a partly *ritual* one since it involves a transformation of numbers from being 'useless' into ones that can be deployed in macroeconomic analysis. This is achieved without changing anything in the numbers themselves, only in the social status they are given. This is definitional of ritual as being used here: the altering of the value of something without the altering of 'it', only its role or status.

Third of all, if some meetings entail transforming numbers into ones that can be used, then another set of meetings entail undertaking and agreeing the policy analysis and deriving recommendations that those numbers enable. These policy meetings are themselves special, and this status is again achieved through a ritual transformation. In this case it is not of the numbers discussed, but of the actions that might ensue because of how those numbers are interpreted. More particularly, the oratorical structure of speeches made within particular meetings are one of the ways the meetings in question come to be special. Without these speeches, the essential characteristics of the events –policy discussions that *produce* policy – would be less. The policy that came out of them would not be real, acted upon policy, but merely conjectures and possibility.

In summary, the purpose of this paper will be to explain how meetings that count are the final stage in a social process that transforms *speechless* numbers into ones that have a *voice*. This voice is communicating something very specific: determinations of what the future will be. For, in the final analysis, the purpose of missions is (crudely speaking) to enable mission teams to divine, along with member authorities, the future in the shadows of the present. Such activities are not undermined by the practical problems that are confronted in their undertaking. On the contrary, this predicting of the future is undertaken on the basis of materials that can be demonstrated to be 'reasonable', 'warranted', 'accurate' and 'objective'. This is not to say that the mission teams and local authorities always do in fact always predict the future precisely. It is to say that in the process, mission teams get themselves and the authorities they are working with into a position where making predictions is a reasonable thing to do. In this sense, the work consists of a kind of science. This science is a practical, hands-on skill. This is what the IMF's mission work is all about – economics in the dirty, muddling context of the real world. This is a *workpractice* that entails assembling

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numbers, facts and models into materials for policy action. This assembly entails processes of social action that might seem far from the definition of macroeconomics in, say, textbooks or as imagined by Keynes and his co-workers when they set up the IMF. But it doesn't make it a lesser economics because of it. Rather, these processes need to be understood as the taken for granted bedrock of this 'science' (if science economics is); the stuff that is done so that the economics can be done.

## **The International Monetary Fund**

The IMF, the Fund as it is known, is based in Washington D.C. It is a financial 'club' whose members consist of most of the countries of the world. Member countries contribute to a pool of resources which can be used to provide low interest, multi-currency loans should a member find itself facing balance of payments problems. At the time of the fieldwork, the Fund had some 3,000 staff, of which 900 were professional economists. These economists analyse economic policies and developments—especially in the macroeconomic arena. They have particular interest in the circumstances surrounding the emergence of financial imbalances (including those that lead to a balance of payments crisis), the policies to overcome such imbalances, and the corrective policy criteria for making loans. This involves going on missions to the country in question. Missions are undertaken by desk officers, who develop and maintain expertise on any particular country throughout the year; a chief (who will manage several desk officers); and two or three other economists who are brought in to help the chief and his or her desk officer dependent upon availability.

## **Method**

The research consisted of six months ethnographic field work in the IMF, both in Washington and on a mission abroad. The fieldwork was carried out by the author. This field work centred around the 'document career' of staff reports, from the first draft of the 'briefing paper' prepared before a mission commences, to observation of a mission itself, to observation of the post-mission review cycle, and then to translation and circulation processes (Harper, 1997).

## A case study of a Fund mission

Limits of space necessitate confining the exposition of a mission to only some representative or typical events of the mission observed. Before starting the exposition, two remarks need to be made. First, the mission studied consisted of a chief and his deputy, the desk officer responsible for the country in question, a fiscal economist, and a rookie economist called an 'EP' (standing for Economist's Programme). Each member of the team, aside from the chief, had a responsibility for preparing numbers in spreadsheet form for each of the main sectors in the economy, and each of them also had a role in producing aggregated tables that represented the economy as a whole. What these tables were made up of, and what responsibility for them meant in practical terms will become clear as the ethnographic evidence of the economists activities is provided. Second, for the sake of confidentiality, the country in question will be called 'Arcadia'.

**Day One: A Vignette:** The first meeting occurred an hour or so after the team had settled themselves in to their hotel in the Arcadian capital. The desk officer commenced the meeting by explaining that when he had arrived at the airport an official had given him two copies of the Arcadian budget and four sets of the national accounts. He explained that although the national accounts had the same bottom line, they were made up of different numbers. He then said:

*"But I have sorted them out. I assume that (the Arcadians) must have included some early drafts. It is not a problem. It is the bottom line that matters at this point. Besides, I can see from the way they have been working which is the most recent so I will use that. I can clarify things with officials later on still, here are some materials that each of you can use to help build up your tables"*.

At which point he started sorting out the tables and giving them to the rest of the team, explaining as he did so: *"These won't be completely right but you can use them to set up the spreadsheets. You can start entering them straight away. Here, use these numbers and these"*.

The deputy then took over the meeting: *"Okay let's not worry about that at the moment. Let's try and plan out what we have to do"*.

She then outlined what meetings had been arranged, and a list was handed out. She pointed out who amongst the team would be meeting which official and when. She turned to ask each economist:

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*"Do you know what you can get out of this person? What information will you still need after this meeting? Do you know who you will need to meet afterwards? Can I have those meetings arranged for you now?"*

She took particular pains to explain what the EP would be doing, listing the officials he would be seeing and explaining why he would see them:

*"The first person you meet tomorrow at the central bank will give you the latest figures on the monetary sector (the EP's concern) but you should get a lot from her because she knows more or less everyone you will need to deal with. She will give you a lot of advice on what you need to find out. She is easy to get on with so don't worry, you will be all right".*

In many ways, then, this first meeting in Arcadia was fairly inconsequential. But there were two telling aspects of the meeting to reflect on: first, the attitude of the desk officer to the materials he was given at the airport, and second, the deputy's concern with whom the mission members would be meeting.

As regards the documents given the desk officer and their apparent oddness: essentially what he found was that four sets of national accounts did not consist of the same individual numbers. It is extremely important to grasp his perspective on this since it would be easy to get it wrong. For example, a conspiratorial desk officer might have contended that the oddity was a reflection of deliberate obfuscation on the part of Arcadian officials. But this desk officer did not think this. Rather, his assumption was that the problem in the documents had to do with the nature of the informational material that was used in the Fund's work. To paraphrase, his view was that this material had to be worked up, crafted, and polished. Further, in this process mistakes could be made, sometimes simple and sometimes more complex. In this case, the oddness was actually the result of a clerical error: some early drafts of the tables had been picked up. In other words, he did not view the material of his work as existing in some tidy, clean and perfect world; a world say, akin to a scientific laboratory. Instead, he assumed that these materials are produced in the ordinary world of offices, overfilled with paperwork and filing cabinets. These materials were produced in the mundane world where simple mistakes get made for all too ordinary reasons.

Much turns around this. For, when one is trying to understand a 'real world', practical activity, in this case the Fund's work, it becomes all too easy to make misleading comparisons between what one might call the 'dirty facts' one finds in



that real world and what one might call the clean, 'tidy facts' one will find in the confines of, say, pure research. Such comparisons, wrong in my opinion, are commonplace, especially in relation to activities that involve numbers (Lave, 1986). It is important to note that this desk officer, and this held for all members of the mission, did not have a contrast of this order in mind. It was rather that he knew there would be practical difficulties of this kind, in his work. He did not bemoan this. The problem, if that is the right description for it, was not that these difficulties would arise so much as they could not be predicted when they would show themselves. As this first instance indicates, these difficulties did indeed show themselves at unexpected times, this time even before the desk officer and his colleagues had got to their hotel.

The second issue that deserves to be raised has to do with how and why the mission team displayed a concern with the *social processes* underlying its work. The fact that the deputy wanted to talk about which meetings were arranged with whom, and therefore what would be the outcome of those meetings, was not a reflection of the mere fact that data had to be produced by someone. It was rather a recognition of the fact that in policy work, *numbers and persons went hand in hand*. The deputy chief and the team as a whole recognised and stated publicly in the meeting described above their knowledge that they needed to know what was the relationship between an individual's role in an organisation and the understanding that individual would have as a result of that position. This could then let the mission team judge what questions they could ask. This may seem a banal point, but it is fundamental to mission activity. The work was all about creating analysis through the social process of agreeing and determining the facts in question. What was of concern to members of a mission was what *in practice* this meant: which people and in what ways could these things be achieved (agreement of the fact) in any particular instance.

This brings us to the problem of the rookie economist – the EP. One of his difficulties was that he was naive as regards these matters. He did not know who to ask about the relevant materials, and perhaps even did not know what would be the right questions to ask even if he did get to the right person. These things he would of course learn through the advice he was given and through the experience that he would slowly accumulate. But that would take time. In the beginning, in this mission, and as attested to by the deputy's solicitation of his understanding, he might find these things difficult. But whatever his frustrations, that he would

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have to deal with them were just the practical realities that have to be dealt with on this and any mission – these are just facts of life of mission work.

These arguments beg the question of exactly what economists ask and of whom. To elaborate the answers to this, a description of some of the things that got done in the early stages of a mission will suffice. The first few days of the mission were spent marching around the various buildings of the Arcadian authorities, gathering more information and more numbers, and discussing with those responsible for their production, issues to do with how to interpret those numbers, and on that basis, how to use them. Each member of the mission had their own circuit of meetings, numbers, and officials to work around.

More specifically, the Fund separates economies into various sectors, and this is reflected in the organisation of the mission process. In this case, the desk officer concentrated on the national accounts, prices, and wages; the fiscal economist concentrated on public finance; and the EP concentrated on the monetary sector and financial reforms. The deputy chief had responsibility for the external sector and the balance of payments. The chief had the task of integrating these figures and of presenting them to the authorities in the policy meetings.

This data collection process consisted of various stages. First, there was the collecting of the initial set of data. This supplemented the data the desk officer had already collected over the year whilst in Washington (at his 'desk'). This desk officer data had allowed each of the economists to part populate their respective spreadsheets. Then the initial set of meetings helped them work these figures up into a better state. These meetings were in such places as the *Central Bank* for balance of payments and foreign currency holdings data, and the *Ministry of Finance* for fiscal figures.

At the end of each day, each economist would add, alter, correct or supplement the figures in their spreadsheets. Then, in meetings with their fellow economists in the evening, they would compare or 'reconcile' figures for their sector(s) with the figures in other sectors, collected in other meetings by their colleagues. When there was a problem of reconciliation between two or more sectors, the team tried to decide what might be the cause. They might conject, for example, that the numbers collected for the fiscal sector were not up-to-date in comparison to figures from other sectors. To investigate if this conjecture was right, the team would

agree that the fiscal economist would enquire into those figures in the next round of his meetings. As he did so, so a further stage of the mission would unfold.

However, the division of labour on the mission consisted of more than a simple a distribution of data gathering jobs. It was also bound up with the need to generate an analytic picture that could help determine what numbers to gather and what those numbers *meant*. This was reflected in the work the deputy chief and the desk officer undertook at the beginning of the mission. In particular, they arranged meetings with one key official. The deputy chief and the desk officer wanted to talk with this individual not only to gather certain figures, but also to get some guidance on how to read and interpret the figures that the team as a whole were assembling. The official in question had an almost unique insight into the economic position of Arcadia. This was based, in part, on years of work in various ministries and, in part, on his current role in the Ministry of Planning. What they were after was two things. First, they wanted some advice on how to separate the flotsam from the main body of economic fact. For the figures that would be collected, the data they gathered, consisted both of long term trends or "underlying movements" and elements reflecting "one-off events". The official in the Ministry could provide the "inside information" that would allow the mission to distinguish between the two in their analysis. The second purpose of these meetings related to the fact that the official could share with them the perspective the authorities had on current economic trends (as against the irrelevant "one offs"). Here the concern was for the mission to understand the weight given to some issues and the indifference felt towards others. Ultimately there would be a good chance that these views would be shared with the team during the policy discussions that concluded the mission, but the team wanted to get an understanding before those events so as to tailor their investigations in such a way as to enable them to "talk to those views" at the appropriate time – i.e. in the policy meetings. The trust between the official and the team was also such that the official could offer frank remarks that might be more difficult to make in the policy meetings. For example, the official was quite willing to say the authorities "really didn't know" why some trend was manifesting itself in the figures whereas in the policy meetings such admissions would be difficult. It is important to realise that such frankness was not pointing towards failings on the part of the authorities. By and large they had considerable knowledge about the matters at hand. It was just that there were a handful of issues that they were unsure about. This was a fact of life; only in such private meetings before the police meetings could these facts be discussed candidly.

Essentially the process in question consisted of a series of meetings during which the numbers (in the national accounts, the monetary sector, and so on) were briefly analysed and discussed. These meetings went on throughout the mission as the team gradually revised and built up its own tables. The process itself involved going through the individual numbers (or category of numbers) one by one, while the official simply outlined what he thought the team ought to know about that category, presenting as he did so the Arcadians' view on those numbers. Sometimes the members of the mission raised their own concerns about a number, requesting the official to explain some issues there and then, or to investigate those numbers for discussion later on.

**Discussing the Facts amongst the Facts: A Vignette:** To illustrate with the first of these meetings, the topic of which was "the macroeconomic framework and review of overall developments". Once formalities had been completed, the desk officer said that the mission wanted to get some explanation as to why there had been a lowering of export volumes and an increase in imports over projections in the most recent quarterly figures. He pointed towards the relevant numbers in the tables. The official responded by saying the answer(s) lay not in the general but in the particular, and suggested that they go through each subcategory of exports and imports as represented in the desk officer's spreadsheets. This indeed was how they proceeded.

The desk officer commenced the discussions: "*Mechanical and electrical goods: these are down on projections: why?*"

The official replied: "*There is poor demand for these goods. It reflects the general weakening of demand in the world economy.*"

Desk Officer: "*But if this is the case why has there been an increase in imports of raw materials given that there appears to be a slowdown in the economy as a whole?*"

Official: "*Well, because there has been an increase in investments in tourism. This has caused an increase in imports of raw materials – building goods. This is seasonal: it is the time when many buildings need rebuilding. It is not a trend.*"

Desk Officer: "*Okay, whilst on the subject of tourism, let's move down the table to numbers for tourism. how is that there has been a decline? Or rather, how is it that there has been a decline: receipts for tourism are down.*"

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Official: *"Tourism? There are more tourists this year but they spend less. I think it is that we went downmarket a bit. The tourists who are coming this year spend less than those who came last year."*

The economist viewed these explanations as adequate and ticked the relevant numbers in his tables. Now he understood 'what they meant'.

On certain categories of numbers the discussions became even more detailed. Partly this was a reflection of what numbers were available. For example, the imports numbers had the following categories which led the deputy chief and desk officer to ask for quite specific accounts:

Deputy: *"Why has there been such large increase in agriculture and food stuffs? Look, this figure here: milk and yoghurt."*

Official: *"Well, it has become fashionable - I think it is to do with healthy eating."*

Deputy: *"But this is a huge increase, this is millions of litres. No, seriously?"*

Official: *"Yes! What can I say? People in Arcadia didn't used to drink milk. It's not traditional. This year everyone is drinking it. I think young people think it will make them look like athletes."*

The official then patted his tummy and said: *"I've not been drinking it!"* The desk officer and deputy chief looked at each other and laughed. *"Okay, let's not worry about that one, it won't show itself in the final total anyway."*

As the days passed, so the focus of concern changed in these meetings. Gradually, the team began to build up a higher level picture where things like the oddities in the current accounts disappeared from view. There is no need to describe these discussions, however, since the main point to draw from these meetings was how the official was able to give inside information, information that derived from his location within the government and at the centre of information production. Meetings with him were an informal nexus whereby the team were able to sort out the "facts amongst the facts" and to learn about the authorities' perspectives on those facts.

It is important to note, however, that as the team moved toward completion of the data gathering stage of the mission and began to reconcile the tables they were generating (i.e., for the monetary, the real, the fiscal and the external sector), so

they embarked on another cycle of activity. Here the role of this official changed. For though he was able to give very useful comments on many of the numbers in question, he was only able to *sanction* a subset. The team needed to get all of its figures sanctioned before they could start on the analysis of policy and prepare their efforts to discuss policy with the authorities. By using the term sanction I am pointing toward the fact that the Arcadian authorities had to agree to a number being used by the mission.

An illustration of this was provided by the fiscal economist's activities. He commenced his work with meetings with a senior member of the Ministry of Finance. During these meetings he set out some of the figures in the budget he wanted to discuss. The official nearly always directed the fiscal economist to other, more junior officials to discuss these numbers. During the meetings the economist had with these junior individuals, they explained why they had calculated the numbers and how. One might characterise this part of the fiscal officer's activities as a process of going to the horse's mouth: i.e. getting to the person who was responsible of the production of the numbers in question. Now going to the horse's mouth is not all that the fiscal officer had to do. For once he had understood the numbers in question, once he had revised his own numbers, once he had worked up the picture as he understood it, he then had to go back to the more senior official to get that individual to "sign off" the numbers.

There are a number of reasons why he had to do so. First, he had to make sure that the numbers he got from the junior official would not be contradicted by numbers generated elsewhere. A senior official may be more likely to know this. Second, some of the figures he ended up using in his tables were the product of calculation prompted by his own questioning. Therefore the more senior official would not necessarily have seen these numbers beforehand. Since this official would ultimately be held responsible for these numbers, it was therefore proper that *he* signed them off. Part of the protocol of this meant that the junior official showed the newly calculated numbers to his senior colleague before the fiscal economist did so. But thus, and this reflected a more salient point, these signings off were a ritual display of social status and power. This was particularly obvious in relation to the senior official the fiscal economist dealt with since this individual was a political appointee. He had no interest in the numbers his more junior staff calculated nor very little understanding of why they were calculated. Nonetheless, it was his signature that was required before those numbers could be used. He was also very conscious of his right to do so, remarking on his status as

he signed the actual figures he was presented with in front of the mission economist and the more junior officials.

By combining the product of all this work in the various ministries that the team visited, the team constructed a basis upon which they could start making some concrete determinations of policy alternatives. The output of their work could not be measured on, say, the basis of completeness, comprehensiveness or accuracy. Rather, the product of their activities was a perspective from which to reason through policy alternatives. This is ultimately the purpose of missions: not description, not reporting, but enabling a mapping out of the implications of the current situation for the future. That this is so is shown in the fact that the main event of the mission was the policy discussions that concluded it. As the deputy chief put it, these were "*What it is all about,*" "*The thing that matters*".

We have only provided some illustrations of the activities the team undertook to prepare themselves for these discussions – the vignettes with the 'informant' in the Ministry of Planning for example. Now, we turn to a third vignette, this time of one these policy meetings. The concern here is to provide a flavour of how these meetings could have particular effects, transforming discussions of numbers presented by the chief into discussions about "real" policy.

**A Vignette of Policy Discussions:** When the team gathered in the hotel reception early in morning of the first day of policy meetings, towards the end of two weeks of activity, there was an atmosphere of relief combined with tension. The economists knew that they would not be doing much during the discussions and that the chief would be the centre of attention. This was his day. But they knew also that the outcome of these meetings could either be the completion of the mission on schedule or the need for more work and delay. On this particular day, there were to be two meetings: the first with the Ministry of Finance, the second with the Central Bank. We focus on this latter.

Officials were waiting for the delegation at the entrance to the bank, and led the team into a meeting room. The chief entered first, followed by his staff. Whilst waiting for the bank officials to arrive, the chief asked for his economists to sit either side of him. He took some spreadsheet tables from his briefcase and placed them on the desk in front. He began to move them around like a painter preparing his palette. He then asked the desk officer for one of the medium term projections tables, which he added to his collection on the table. Finally, he took some

handwritten notes from his jacket pocket and placed them in the centre of his palette of documents.

An official then burst in and announced the imminent arrival of the bank's Governor. The team stood up. The Governor arrived with a flurry of officials and secretaries behind him. The Governor sat down directly opposite the chief, similarly surrounded by his cohorts. After formalities, the meeting began. The chief stood up and commenced his oration. He complimented the Arcadians on the work that had been achieved in the past year and the impressive performance in certain areas of the economy. He commented also on the continuing frailties in certain areas. The chief then came to what the mission believed was the heart of the matter, for it was the team's view that the authorities were clearly exceeding their projected credit levels to the government. There were a number of reasons for this, including lower than expected growth in some sectors and, most noticeably, an unexpected growth in expenditure in agricultural stocks, particularly for olives. Related to this, there was a reduction in the revenues from the sale of olives in export markets – all of this in a year where the harvest had been unusually good. The chief explained that as a result of this situation, the Arcadian authorities would find their foreign reserves getting reduced to a very low level, little more than one week's imports, or even lower. They were earning less foreign currency whilst their spending was going up (i.e., sales of olives were down whilst costs for their production and storage were up). One week's reserves was, according to the chief, too little, and necessitated immediate corrective policies. Failure to adopt these policies could lead the Arcadians to seek assistance from the Fund in the near future.

When the chief finished his oration there was a long silence. Then the Governor turned to his officials and beckoned them to gather round his chair. For some minutes the Arcadians discussed matters quietly amongst themselves. All the mission could see was a wall of individuals with their backs facing outward. Gradually, officials started to peel off and return to their seats. Eventually, the Governor turned to face the table again. After a pause, the Governor explained that his staff wanted to go through the numbers again. The chief repeated his figures. The Arcadians looked at each other, before the Governor said that they concurred with his calculations. One of the officials then asked if he would tell them who provided each of the main numbers – i.e., which persons in which department had given them to him. The chief, with the help of his team, provided this information. The Arcadians again huddled together. Eventually, they



returned to the table. After a pause, the Governor nodded to one of his officials who then announced that the "authorities did indeed agree with the figures that the chief had presented".

The next stage of the meeting involved investigating policy alternatives on the basis of the agreed to figures. The chief started this stage with another oration during which he outlined what he thought were the main issues to be investigated – methods for reducing costs, increasing revenues, and such like. "Investigations" followed. In brief, these involved modifying certain variables in the *monetary tables* to see just what the impact would be on other variables. Different policies would affect different variables and so the hope was to eventually determine the "appropriate policy stance".

These investigations took some time. By the time the meeting ended, the mission team and the staff of the central bank had spent nearly five hours together.

## **Conclusion: The Raw and the Cooked**

There was obviously much more involved in this meeting (and others not discussed) than is conveyed in these brief remarks. The concern here is to focus on the fact that this meeting was one that turned out to be one that *counted*. There are two aspects to this. On the one hand, the meeting was about adding numbers; on the other, it had a particular and crucially symbolic aspect that made those countings matter. Both issues are intimately connected. But one has precedence over the other.

The meeting consisted of two main parts, with a watershed in the middle. The chief's orations commenced both stages. His initial oration started with a presentation not just of what the team had been working on, the figures they had gathered, but the team's final view on what these figures 'meant'. Given that the team was invested by the Fund to act on its behalf, this view was effectively the Fund's view. Accordingly, it was presented with all the solemnity it deserved. This was not an opportunity for the discussion of opinions, or for jokes and levity. But nonetheless, this view *did not count* unless it was accepted by the Arcadians. For, though the Arcadians had been involved in its development (some individuals more than others as we have seen) the Arcadian authorities had not officially accepted it. Nor were they under any obligation to do so. The periods during which the Governor and his officials turned away and discussed the chief's remarks were

opportunities for them to decide whether to accept or reject it. These were therefore moments pregnant with tension for the mission team. It was only once the Arcadians had announced acceptance that the next stage of the meeting could occur. This second stage also involved the chief standing up and making a speech, but this time his remarks had a different character. If before they were descriptive, now they became an opportunity to outline issues to be investigated – to offer conjectures; not facts and their 'self evident' interpretation. It is in this respect that there was a watershed in the centre of the meeting. For after the Governor's acceptance, the chief's presentation became the common ground upon which both sides undertook subsequent analytical work. We shall say some more about that work in a moment, but before that some more remarks about the significance of this watershed are appropriate.

It might appear that what is being proposed is a view on missions that echoes the perspective of Levi-Strauss (1962). Levi-Strauss was an anthropologist who claimed (amongst other things) that what was essential to human society was the fact that objects in the world were transformed from their natural, "unsocial" status into social objects by the process of "cooking". Levi-Strauss' argument was that it was the miraculous transformation that cooking brought about that displayed humanities God-like power over nature. Here it might be thought that the suggestion is being made that policy meetings involve a transformation of something that is, in a sense, *raw* into a thing that is *cooked*. In being cooked it is thereby touchable, clean, and, in the Fund's sense, useable for analysis. Although this will allow some light-hearted remarks about how missions are involved in the process of "cooking the books," the comparison with Levi-Strauss's idea is useful. For it draws attention to the *moral element* in the work that gets undertaken on mission, a moral element made conspicuous in the process of sanctioning numbers. For the process of converting "raw numbers" into meaningful and "useable" information constitutes, in part, a *moral transformation* and not just – arithmetical or econometric one. In being accepted by the Arcadians, the numbers came to be ones that counted. This is in part a moral process because being accepted, or *passing the test* made no difference to the numbers as numbers. The difference made is to the moral status of the numbers. This did not just hold for the events within the policy meetings, albeit that they highlight the issues most clearly. Mission work as a whole consisted of a process of gathering data, subjecting these data to various assessments and sanctionings, and, if the data passed these tests, using them in analytical tasks.

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This leads back to the second stage of the meetings. For here the kind of analytical work undertaken was clearly empirical; a hands-on science. But it was also social, wherein the various participants tested and corroborated their investigations with their colleagues. Of crucial importance, these meetings were populated by those people whose status and business was to determine what was the right way and the wrong way of doing these things, for these were experts doing their work. It is in this sense that there is an additional basis for the claim that mission work has a moral component. For these meetings could only be undertaken if the "experts" in this field were there. The experts in question were both those people who may have had technical training in economics and those whose social position, say as Governor of the central bank, entitled them to be there. It was the determinations of *these* people that counted and *their* assessments of what was the right way of doing things that mattered. This was why these meetings *counted*.

These claims may seem quite distant from questions to do with the epistemology of the economics undertaken by the Fund, even if they are meant to be accurate descriptions of the workpractices that the Fund's staff undertake. But what is being suggested is that certain social processes enable certain sorts of information to be suited for organisational use, in this case for use by the Fund and its member authorities. Information does not 'sit out there' in the real world waiting to be caught up in an information net, in this case a net of economic knowledge. The task of the Fund's Missions is not simply to go and collect data. The practices of missions make information suitable for processing, and this is, it should be clear, in large part a social process involving mundane data gathering activities, but also ceremony and symbolic change. Shifting the status of numbers from being mere numbers into ones that can be acted upon is central to this work. Though such changes may be quite correctly described as ritual, insofar as they entail altering the role of an object (a number) but not altering its self (i.e. its value), these practices are essentially practical rather than religious (as is often implied when the term ritual is used). It is this practical concern that constitutes the essence premise of the computational and analytical work that missions undertake, even if they do not constitute computation or analysis. In short, to understand the epistemic basis of the IMF's work one needs to understand how information is transformed into the kind of object that is suitable for practical action that is policy work.

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Lots of things turn on this. One is that it is only thus that one can properly understand what the IMF's work really consists of. It is described as macroeconomic policy work by the Fund itself and it is so labelled by those outside in journalistic articles and reports; but the doing of that work entails activities that are glossed over in these normal descriptions. What this paper has offered is an anthropology of the IMF's workpractices which does not privilege one set of descriptions or labels over another, but simply describes the work in terms of its practical details. Obviously many practical details have been left out in this short analysis. But hopefully an indication of what are the most important has been provided.

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