

Waiting

Shabram Kbosravi

Waiting is a particular experience of time. Waiting is inescapable. It is a feature of human relationships. In our daily lives, we wait at airports, offices, and shops. Waiting is a common feature of bureaucracy; when in contact with organizations, individuals wait their turn and officials' decisions. Waiting is expecting something coming from others. Keeping others waiting is also a technique for the regulation of social interactions. It is a manipulation of other's time. Waiting, as Pierre Bourdieu puts it, is a way of experiencing the effect of power. 'Making people wait... delaying without destroying hope is part of the domination' (Bourdieu, 2000). To keep people waiting, without ruining their hope, is an exercise of power over other people's time. Waiting is a common experience for the less powerful groups in society, producing 'subjective effects of dependency and subordination' (Auyero, 2012). The 'punitive' aspect of waiting is when a person is 'kept ignorant as to how long he must wait' (Schwartz, 1975). Waiting generates feelings of 'powerlessness and vulnerability'. Marginalized and unprivileged groups, to use Crapanzano's words, 'wait for something, anything, to happen. They are caught in the peculiar, the paralytic, time of waiting' (1985). Another consequence of waiting is the feeling that one is not fully in command of one's life. To be kept waiting for a long time 'is to be the subject of an assertion that one's own time (and therefore, one's social worth) is less valuable than the time and worth of the one who imposes the wait' (Schwartz, 1975).

The arbitrariness and precariousness of waiting is best depicted in literature. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is about endless waiting for someone who never comes, and for something that never happens. Frantz Kafka's *Before the Law* is about a man from the countryside permanently waiting *before* and *for* the law. His entrance is deferred, 'not yet allowed'. This 'not yet' illustrates the abstractedness and inaccessibility of the law that keeps people waiting without having their hopes dashed.

Large numbers of displaced people – undocumented migrants, refugees and asylum seekers – spend extended periods waiting in camps, in transit lands, or in search of papers. Lack of information on how long they have to wait, or what exactly they have to do to get their permits, makes their lives unpredictable and uncertain. This is most palpable in the case of asylum seekers, and in detention centres where migrants can often be kept indefinitely before deportation.

Prolonged waiting, for papers or deportation, means 'not being in-time with others'. For many others, Mondays represent 'moving forward', the first day of a meaningful

week of work. In contrast, for undocumented migrants, Mondays mean 'remaining at the same point'. Their time is not that of 'ordinary' people. Undocumented migrants use terms like 'dead time' or 'a time of death' when talking about their lives kept waiting.

In western societies, people approach time in terms of how it can be used most efficiently. Time is associated with success and money. It is presented as a form of capital, which, similar to money, can be 'counted, saved, spent, lost, wasted or invested' (Schwartz, 1975). Hence waiting symbolizes waste, emptiness and uselessness. There is a discrepancy between the speed, mobility, and temporalities in modern societies, and the experiences of individuals forced into a prolonged act of waiting. Waiting by the poor, the unemployed, asylum seekers, undocumented migrants or youngsters can result in a weakening of a sense of social function, and of their connections to the larger society, generating a feeling of purposelessness and 'rolelessness'. Furthermore, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants are constantly waiting for decisions and assistance coming from others: the state, churches, NGOs, legal firms, labour unions or employers. The dependence on others' decisions and help leads to a patronizing relationship, with the migrant surrendering to the authority of others.

Waiting is often an experience of what Victor Turner (1969) calls liminality, the transitory stage between two social positions, between two stages of life. Undocumented migrants have left their legal status in their homelands and are waiting, hopefully, for a new status. Meanwhile, they are caught betwixt and between, their status socially and structurally ambiguous. The loss of social status and role generates vulnerability. For Turner, there are similarities between liminality and marginality and inferiority.

When liminality is turned into protracted waiting, the underpinnings of social life are temporarily/temporally suspended. Accordingly, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants find themselves in a situation Hage calls 'stuckedness' (2009); characterized by invisibility, immobility, uncertainty and arbitrariness. The ambiguity about the duration of waiting generates a sense of uncertainty, shame, depression and anxiety. This can lead to sleep disorders and psychosomatic pain. Dread, angst or guilt are all components of the experience of waiting. But waiting can be an act too, a strategy of defiance by the migrants. Failed asylum seekers and undocumented migrants who wait in hiding may do so in hope of a regularization programme or with plans for

moving on. Waiting does not have to mean passivity, and can be an element in a strategy by migrants to improve their situation.

References

Auyero, J. (2012) *Patients of the State: The Politics of Waiting in Argentina*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2000) *Pascalian Meditations*, Stanford: Stanford University Press

Crapazano, V. (1985) *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa*, London: Random House

Hage, G. (2009) *Waiting*, Carlton South: Melbourne University Press.

Schwartz, B. (1975) *Queuing and Waiting: Studies in the Social Organization of Access and Delay*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Turner, V. (1969) *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. Chicago: Aldine Pub Co.

