

RESPONSE

Reflections on Queuing and Comments on Charles Tilly's "Past and Future Inequalities" (Hagar 2: 1 2001, pp. 5-18)

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Waiting in Queues

My almost daily commute is between home in East Jerusalem and work at Birzeit University outside the West Bank town of Ramallah. I am among those Palestinians who hold the right papers allowing one to cross the checkpoints which randomly dot the main arteries from the West Bank into Jerusalem. Over the last decade, these checkpoints have evolved into yet another visible expression of Israel's attempt to extend its sovereignty over land it illegally occupies through creating new geographies of ethnic exclusion. East Jerusalem, closed off to West Bank Palestinians, is no longer an economic, cultural and spiritual capital, but rather a series of dying neighborhoods, strangled by Jewish settlements and buried under highways linking those settlements to the dynamic and growing Western side of the city. The checkpoints, as with every Israeli policy towards Palestinians, were originally deigned necessary for security -- to prevent "Palestinian terrorists" from entering Israel through East Jerusalem. The fact that since their imposition there has been more rather than less killing of Israelis in bus bombings and suicide operations has yet to lead Israelis to query their logic. Instead, the relentless wheels of security continue to roll forward to the chorus of ever-more stringent controls and even tighter "closure".

While waiting in the long line of Palestinian cars at one of these checkpoints I began to reflect on Charles Tilly's paper – and, in particular, his discussion of the queue as one among several metaphors for processes of inequality. While he ultimately rejects the queue as an exceptional case, since it is

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based on an individual sorting of categories, the experience of being in an actual queue that both reflects and reproduces inequality suggests to me that the metaphor deserves more attention. I have not read the literature on queuing, but Tilly's discussion seems to suggest that the concept has been developed primarily in relation to issues of labor market inequality and job mobility. This may account for the emphasis on queuing as operating at the level of selection of individuals according to various criteria. The checkpoints, which I and thousands of Palestinians have to deal with on a daily basis, suggest that the relation between queuing and inequality may be more diverse. In particular, instead of focussing on individual attributes being sorted by a central monitor, in this case we may have multiple and differential queues that one is in (or enters) based on the categorical distinctions that Tilly rightly suggests are produced elsewhere.

The other aspect of inequality that actual queuing encompasses is the maintenance of the existing relationship between what Tilly calls exploitation and opportunity hoarding. The metaphorical queue, by operating on a high level of abstraction, seems to me to miss a main attribute of actual queues for those who are in them -- which is the experience of waiting and immobility. It is only those at the back of the metaphorical queue who, in reality, spend their time waiting in queues -- or what I will term "inequality queues". For Western middle classes, in daily life actual queuing is a minor annoyance experienced when buying services, when giving the state its due, or when being passed through airport control. Elites, rarely, if ever, find themselves in actual queues. But for the economically and ethnically excluded, waiting in queues and being stopped by them (which includes being pulled out of moving queues) is a common feature of existence and a recurrent sign of their inequality. One just has to think of unemployment and social welfare offices, or public hospitals where even in the most efficient democracies waiting is the dominant feature of those unequal enough to be standing in line. Similarly, a common picture in much of the third world is one of masses of potential migrant laborers standing outside the consulates of countries that might grant them the chance to make a living. Again, waiting -- albeit anxiously. Or, the worst case scenario, refugees in camps who can spend years or even generations waiting to be repatriated home or granted asylum somewhere else. Every part of their existence is a slow or immobile queue -- queuing for water, for rations, for health services, and ultimately for a decision to come from some far away place that will transform them out of the category of refugee and into the magical state of citizen.

One queue or many?

Observing the development of Israeli checkpoints criteria through time is useful in understanding the rules necessary for queues to function as reproducers

of inequality. Originally, along the main artery between Ramallah and Jerusalem (the Nablus Road), the checkpoint was supposed to operate as a queue that made functional differentiations among Palestinians (West Bank versus Jerusalem, West Banker with work permit versus without). However, the problem was that Israeli settlers in the West Bank also used the same road, and thus they would often end up waiting angrily and nervously with Palestinians. The checkpoint could not function under these circumstances and settlers were among the most vocal early critics of "closure". The solution came with the creation of settler by-pass roads which would completely remove them to their own ethnically marked routes into Jerusalem. For sure, there were checkpoints into Jerusalem at the end of these "settler roads", but until a class action suit was served to the Israeli high court in 1996, Palestinians had been excluded from using them, thus settlers ended up at their own separate checkpoints where they were easily waved through.

Once Israeli settlers were removed from the equation, one would assume that the original checkpoints could then begin to efficiently sort through different types of Palestinians. But something fundamental had changed -- those in the queue had become ethnically homogeneous and their differential administrative status was incapable of overriding this fact. As such, the physical sorting function of the queues often slowed to almost a total halt. The queue had become only for Palestinians -- and thus it was no longer a queue in Tilly's sense. Instead, it became defined by the existence of another queue based on the fundamental categorical distinction at work here -- Israeli versus Palestinian. Thus, its very nature changed from one of sorting to one of maintaining these categorical distinctions.

Categorical Mixing in Inequality Queues

When categorical distinctions become mixed up in the same actual queue is when one can see the importance of such differential queues in maintaining the current system or logic of inequality. Nowhere is this so apparent as when dealing with ethnic and national differences. Recently I had to go to the American Consulate in East Jerusalem in order to pick up the death certificates of a Palestinian American colleague on behalf of his family who could not get there. On the street, outside the consulate, were two queues; one for American citizens and one for non-Americans. This is a context in which U.S. bureaucratic categories override the fundamental categorical differences that exist here between Israelis and Palestinians. In both lines, mixed together, one finds ultra-orthodox Jews, secular Israelis, old Palestinian women in peasant dress, young Muslim women wearing headscarves and jeans and nervous young *shabaab* hoping to go to university or emigrate. The organizing categories of the two American queues shed no light whatsoever on the ethnic, religious or racial

character of those who stood in them -- which in this context deeply disturbs the existing order of things. Similarly, the guards were an admixture of Israelis and Palestinians -- with the former more involved in bag searches and the latter responsible for allowing people in and out.

Once inside the cramped interior, the reactions to this bizarre Middle Eastern version of Ellis Island were bound to be different; Palestinians clearly enjoying the breakdown of the ethnic hierarchy that so dominates their lives, Israelis stoically looking at their watches and attempting not to make eye contact. Suddenly, the atmosphere of restrained composure was shattered by the entrance of a very angry settler woman (with what I took to be a New York accent). She was ready to explode -- which she verbally did. Angry and confused, not sure of her audience but somehow deciding it was a reflection of herself, she broke into an outraged speech. *It was bad enough to be coming to her consulate and it being in East Jerusalem ... and that she had to stand outside in line with Arabs but the worst, as an American, was being herded around inside the consulate by(I think a Yiddish word akin to "towel heads") speaking Arabic! And then to be dumped in this room with more* she never got a chance to finish the last line as most of the Palestinians in unison yelled back, "we're all Americans".

This woman most likely verbalized what many of the American Israelis were thinking. But she had made her own category mistake, by assuming that the basic distinctions of inequality operating in Israel would also be the organizing principles in the United States -- or at least in its overseas spaces. For her, the path from Beit El to the queue at the "for Americans only services window" inside the U.S. consulate should have been coherent -- in which the difference between Arab and Jew should be the fundamental and continuous organizing category. However, the Palestinian claim of Americanness, as an assertion of equality with the settler woman within the bounds of the U.S. consulate also has its problems. The majority of Palestinian Americans there had "illegally" reached the consulate from the West Bank in order to obtain an affidavit of U.S. citizenship that would allow them to request a permit from the Israeli authorities in order to reach the only airport from which they are able to exit the country. Even within the over-air conditioned consulate walls, taking numbers alongside Israeli or Jewish Americans, their basic inequality within the borders of their Palestinian patrimony was the very reason they were here at all.

Queues, Time and Inequality

A general rule of inequality queues is that when those in them collectively question or revolt against them, they are either shut down and suspended, or come to a grinding halt. In cases where people are queuing for goods and services

(refugees lined up for rations or the unemployed for welfare benefits, etc...) the response to revolt is simply to close down. In the case of checkpoints and queues which are about allowing movement from one place to the next (border crossings) movement is simply halted. Prior to the al Aqsa intifada, the slowing of the "for Palestinians only" checkpoint into Jerusalem was extremely random. One often passed these lines manned by disinterested soldiers in trendy sunglasses talking on their mobile phones without even stopping. All of the differential sub-categories were ignored and everyone, regardless of the color of their license plates or identity cards, passed through the barriers. But there were always times and moments when the checkpoints came into action. Usually this was limited to the singling out of individuals who caught the soldiers' whim and brought the line to a momentary stop while questions were asked and papers looked at. The total halting of the line had been a feature over the past ten years -- especially on "high security days" such as Israeli holidays or Palestinian commemorations. However only following the uprising did active and interminable enforced waiting at the checkpoints become dominant. In addition, the original checkpoints became buttressed by many many more (more than 55 in the West Bank alone), making movement within the West Bank and within Gaza virtually impossible. In their parlance, human rights organizations have correctly named this a form of collective punishment. Sorting is not a function of these checkpoints -- papers are rarely checked. Instead, all the roads in a certain area are completely sealed off and only one route, out or in, is left open. On this remaining route barricades leave only one narrow channel that both lanes have to squeeze through as soldiers allow cars through one by one. The immediate effect is a traffic jam five kilometers long in both directions and along the side of the road are hundreds of people who gave up on cars walking through with hopes of catching a ride on the other side. For those who attempt to continue with regular life -- going to school, work or home, merchants moving goods to market, or individuals trying to get to the doctor, there is no choice but to wait.

The checkpoints between East Jerusalem and Ramallah are notably different than the other Israeli checkpoints that now abound throughout the West Bank and Gaza. The former are within what Israel considers the municipal boundaries of "unified Jerusalem". This also makes them too close to the center of the international (and Israeli) press corps. Thus, they function much more benignly than those deeper in the West Bank or Gaza where Palestinians and the IDF interface without the watchful gaze of useful onlookers. At those other checkpoints, people mistakenly assuming they were allowed to cross have been shot and, more common, enforced waiting has led to the death of Palestinians trying to reach hospitals.

While the latter case exemplifies the conquerors' contempt for the lives of those they have conquered, it also offers a dramatic example of the way in which inequality queues are also constituted by differential control over time itself. For those operating the checkpoints (and those giving them orders), time is not coeval. Palestinian time is "cheap" and infinite while Israeli time is a valuable finite resource. The soldiers at the checkpoints are on a schedule, marked by hours of accomplished military service. Their bored time is accounted for by stopping and passing Palestinians through checkpoints. These hours will be added up and translated into the accomplishment of national duty which will be registered and tradable towards an array of benefits and social entitlements. The notion that Palestinians might have useful and productive things to do is inconceivable given the nature of the relationship. We can only have value in relation to necessary or useful things we provide for those whose time is counted. Our value to ourselves, the tasks we perform and the things we produce for our families and within our own communities is beyond their conception. Here, being located in another time and not being perceived as bearers of human capital are profoundly intertwined.

To use Johannes Fabian's insight, colonial projects have several alternatives with which to deal with the fact of literally occupying the space of a pre-existing body: remove the other body (America, Australia), pretend that space is divided and allocated to separate bodies (South Africa), or most often to assign to the conquered populations a different time. Historically, all three have been an aspect of Israel's confrontation with Palestinian existence in the same space. Following the 1967 occupation, the second alternative became the dominant one. Palestinians inhabited another space -- whose common designation by Israelis as "the territories" suggested that while it was not Israel, luckily it was both amorphous and had no borders. With the new geography created by the Oslo Peace Agreement, Israelis now located Palestinians in something non-territorial altogether -- the "Palestinian Authority". Palestinians no longer occupied a physical space at all -- only a political one. This new, popular designation is very convenient -- at once marginally recognizing Palestinian nationalist aspirations and thus justifying their disenfranchisement from the Israeli polity, while precluding the need to return land beyond the heavily populated Palestinian towns.

The problem, of course, is when Israeli soldiers are occupying the same physical space as Palestinians -- face to face. No longer are Palestinians in some far away "homeland" and particularly given that the majority of Israelis, like all good colonizers, refuse to see themselves as colonizers -- their physical presence in the space of the "other" requires some other logic. Twice, in fits of pathetic anger, I told soldiers at checkpoints outside Birzeit to think about why they are there -- I got the exact same immediate defensive response -- *this is my job, I have*

to do it. In these cases, I assume I found those fighting their conscience. It would be impossible for them to retort that their sole function of being there is to make Palestinians' lives untenable by making our everyday movement impossible. Instead, by locating themselves in their necessary and useful "jobs", they simultaneously locate themselves outside of our time thus enabling the process of objectifying us into so many units of matter that they can cause to move or stop at will.

Queues, Borders and Globalization

The strategy of locating Palestinians in a different time is a liberal one. For the right wing and settlers in particular, what we find is a total inversion of the colonizer-colonized relationship. For them, Palestinians are the unwanted invaders in the body of greater Israel. In their framework, soldiers at checkpoints in the West Bank and Gaza are allowing Arabs to move across Israeli space. This points to the crux of the issue; Israeli checkpoints in and around Palestinian areas are ultimately various forms of borders or borders-in-the-making. This is because land -- its physical control and sovereign identity -- stands at the core of this conflict. However, as more recent work on borders suggests, it is people who are bearers of borders, rather than borders being fixed lines on geographic territory. Regardless of checkpoints and barbed wire, it is an individual's or a people's nationality, race, ethnicity, class (or sometimes gender) that defines the nature of a physical border and whether it represents an obstacle or not. Etienne Balibar, on a visit to Ramallah a few years ago summed up this equation in relation to Palestinians by remarking that it is especially nations without borders that are such victims of them. For the majority of Palestinians, queuing at passport control at any international border is always an experience of anxiety, often followed by removal from the queue while computers are checked and questions are asked. It is always a powerful reminder that one belongs to a community of failure -- peoples who have failed to attain the signal political achievement of the 19th century (the nation state and formal citizenship). Our experience of being stopped at international borders is intimately linked to those myriad checkpoints Israel imposes in and around our communities in the West Bank and Gaza. In this case, as in many others, the border-less era of globalization offers little promise of mobility.