

Waiting for Godot at Qalandya: Reflections on Queues and Inequality

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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 that 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 new highways linking those settlements to the dynamic and growing Western side of the city.

As with every Israeli policy towards Palestinians, the checkpoints were originally deemed necessary for security: to prevent "Palestinian terrorists" from entering Israel through East Jerusalem. The fact that, since their imposition, there have 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 an even tighter "closure."

The name Qalandya once signified a small village, which can still be found if one gets lost while trying to take a donkey track to Ramallah. After 1948, the large refugee camp created nearby assumed the village's name in the national imagination. For the elite (and older) few who remember flying in or out of the only airport in the West Bank under the Jordanians, Qalandya stood for the modest and forlorn runway and tower that still sit across from the camp.

Since the al-Aqsa Intifada, Qalandya has taken on another meaning for the thousands of Palestinian commuters who have to cross between the arbitrary line Israel has drawn there, between two parts of what it considers "Greater Jerusalem." Some have offered it the title of Erez II, referring to the hellish barbed wire human cattle-runs at the entrance to the Gaza Strip. But this doesn't quite

capture it. Erez is now all but empty, except for a few IDF tanks and the even fewer U.N. and diplomatic personnel still allowed through, while Qalandya is a seething mass of humanity - angry, frustrated, and mostly despairing.

Qalandya, to those who have to go through it, now represents their own personal nightmare of Israeli vengeance. Just a few strategically placed concrete blocks, manned by over-dressed (and over-armed) soldiers, have turned the "crossing" at Qalandya into a two-hour wait each way, as cars and trucks pile up into a traffic jam three kilometers long in both directions. There is no way of evading it, since all other routes between Ramallah and Jerusalem have been totally sealed off.

While waiting in the long line of Palestinian cars at Qalandya checkpoint, I began to think about the idea of queuing as a mechanism for inequality. I had been asked to write a commentary on a paper about future forms of inequality written by the American political theorist Charles Tilly for the Israeli journal *Hagar*, published by Ben Gurion University. Tilly is most well known for his past work on social movements, but in this article, he explores various models and forms of inequality that would dominate in the 21st century. The first model he addresses is that of the queue:

Compare two vivid images of the processes that produce inequality: queues and conversations. The queue image prevails these days. It lines up individuals to pass a checkpoint where a monitor scans them, matches their various attributes with well-established templates, then shunts

them into different channels, where they join other people having similar attributes.

The best-known version of the queue employs one main template: human capital. In this scenario, the monitor is a market or its human agents. The monitor scans each individual for human capital, then matches the detected human capital with a position in which it will produce a net return for the market as well as for the individual.

In competing versions of the queue, the monitor selects for gender, race, fame, estimated commitment, or other attributes instead of - or in addition to - human capital. More complex accounts in the same vein allow for additional effects of effort, inheritance, social connections, and learning, with the individual passing multiple monitors over a career.

Still the central image shows us one person at a time passing a checkpoint and moving on to differential rewards as a consequence of attributes or performances registered at that checkpoint. Cumulatively, such a process generates distributions of individuals and positions differing significantly in current rewards and accumulations of past rewards as a function of their relationship to criteria built into the monitor.

While he ultimately rejects the queue model as an exceptional case since it is 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.

Tilly's discussion of the queue as a mechanism of inequality primarily sees it in relation to issues of labor market inequality and job mobility - and thus the emphasis on human capital theory. The Israeli checkpoints, which with thousands of Palestinians have to deal on a daily basis, suggest that the relation between queuing and inequality may be more diverse. In particular, instead of focusing on individual attributes being sorted by a central monitor, in this case, we may have multiple and differential queues, which one is in (or enters) based on the categorical distinctions of inequality that Tilly rightly suggests are produced elsewhere. As such, queues don't create inequality: their role is to maintain the existing relations of what he calls "exploitation and opportunity hoarding."

Additionally, by operating on a high level of abstraction, the metaphorical queue misses a main attribute of actual queues for those who are in them: 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. For Western middle classes, actual queuing in daily life is a minor irritant, experienced when buying services, giving the state its due, or passing 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 only 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 they wait - albeit anxiously. Or, the worst-case scenario, refugees in camps who may spend years, or even generations, waiting to be repatriated 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 from some far away place to transform their refugee category into the magical state of citizen.

One queue or many? Palestinian Queues and Israeli By-Pass Roads

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 or West Banker with work permit versus without).

However, the problem was that Israeli settlers in the West Bank also used the same road; and 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 completely transferred the settlers 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 were excluded from using them. Thus, settlers ended up at their own separate checkpoints where they were easily waved through.¹

Once Israeli settlers were removed from the equation, one would have assumed that the original checkpoints could then begin to sort efficiently 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. Now everybody who goes through the checkpoint belongs to the undesirables, and can be treated as such. Therefore, the physical sorting function of the queues often slowed to an almost total halt.

The queue had become only for Palestinians, and therefore, 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: Israeli versus Palestinian. Thus, its very nature changed from one of sorting to one of maintaining these inequality distinctions.

Categorical Mixing in Inequality Queues

When categorical distinctions become mixed up in the same actual queue, one can

¹ However, since the latest Intifada, Palestinian exclusion from by-pass roads has been re-instated.

see the importance of such differential queues to the maintenance of what Tilly calls "inequality distinctions." Nowhere is this more apparent than when dealing with ethnic and national differences. Recently, I had to go to the American Consulate in East Jerusalem to pick up the death certificate 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 could find ultra-orthodox Jews, secular Israelis, old Palestinian women in peasant dress, young Muslim women wearing headscarves and jeans, and nervous young *shabaab* (or youths) 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 standing in them - which, in this context, deeply disturbs the existing order of things. Similarly, the guards were a mixture 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 obviously different - Palestinians clearly enjoying the breakdown of the ethnic hierarchy that so dominates their lives and Israelis stoically looking at their watches and attempting to avoid eye contact. Suddenly, the atmosphere of restrained composure was broken by the

entrance of a very angry woman dressed in female settler garb (and equipped with 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 the settlement of Beit El to the queue at the "For Americans Only Services" window inside the U.S. Consulate should have been coherent, with the difference between Arab and Jew being the fundamental and continuous organizing category.

However, the Palestinian claim of American-ness, 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" traveled to the consulate from the West Bank to obtain an affidavit of U.S. citizenship, which would allow them to

request a permit from the Israeli authorities in order to reach the only airport from which they can leave 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 there 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 or suspended, coming to a grinding halt. In cases in which 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, the movement across borders is simply halted.

Prior to the al-Aqsa Intifada, the slowing of the "for Palestinians only" checkpoint into Jerusalem was random. One often passed these lines, manned by apathetic 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,² 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' attention at a whim, bringing the line to a momentary stop while questions were asked and papers examined. 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, it is only following the recent uprising that active and interminable enforced waiting at the checkpoints became dominant. In addition, the original checkpoints became buttressed by new ones (more than 55 in the West Bank alone), making movement within the West Bank and 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 where 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 of traffic have to squeeze through, as soldiers allow cars through one by one. The immediate effect is a five-kilometer long traffic jam, while along the side of the road, hundreds of people who gave up on cars must walk 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 from the other Israeli checkpoints that now abound

² The Israeli military authorities require that Palestinians carry identity cards (and, until the arrival of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, license plates) with colors indicating their place of residence. This allows Israeli soldiers at checkpoints to quickly differentiate between West Bank residents and Jerusalem residents.

throughout the West Bank and Gaza. The former are within what Israel considers the municipal boundaries of "unified Jerusalem." This also places these checkpoints too close to the center of the international (and Israeli) press corps. Therefore, they function much more benignly than those deeper inside the West Bank or Gaza, where Palestinians and the IDF confront each other away far away from the watchful gaze of helpful onlookers.

One only has to compare the differing fate of peaceful marches at checkpoints. Around Jerusalem, Palestinians were able to march for half an hour before tear gas and rubber bullets were fired; in the same period, such marches outside Nablus and in Gaza met with immediate live fire. At checkpoints further inside the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinians, mistakenly assuming they were allowed to cross, have been shot; and, more commonly, enforced waiting has led to the death of those 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 time, tediously spent stopping and passing Palestinians through checkpoints, is accounted for. 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 our own communities are beyond the soldiers' 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,³ colonial projects have had several alternatives to which to refer in dealing with the fact of literally occupying the space of a pre-existing body: remove the other body (i.e. America and Australia); pretend that space is divided and allocated to separate bodies (i.e. South Africa); or most often, assign a different time to the conquered populations.

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 have 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

³ Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the Other; How Anthropology Makes its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

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 in 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 cause to move or stop at will.

Queues, Borders and Globalization

The strategy of locating Palestinians in a different time is a strategy for liberal Israelis. For the right wing, and settlers in particular, what we find is a total inversion of the colonizer-colonized relationship. For them,

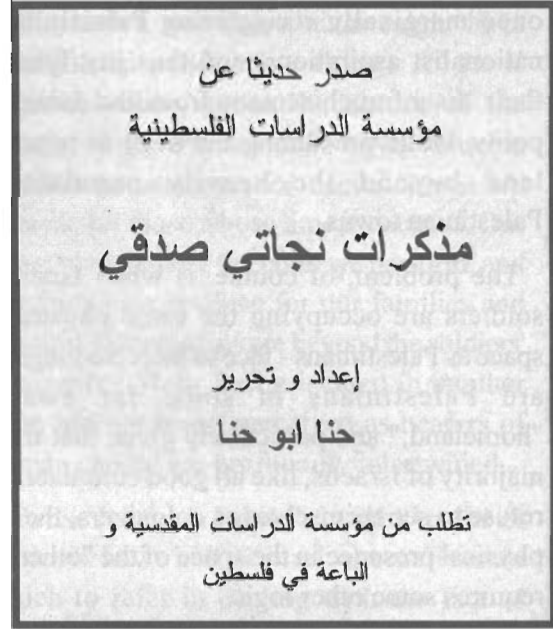
Palestinians are the unwanted invaders in the body of greater Israel. In their framework, soldiers at checkpoints in the West Bank and Gaza are allowing Arabs to move across Israeli space. This points to the crux of the problem; Israeli checkpoints in and around Palestinian areas are ultimately various 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 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 determines whether it represents an obstacle or not. On a visit to Ramallah a few years ago, the French political theorist Etienne Balibar summed up this equation in relation to Palestinians by remarking that it is especially nations without borders that are such victims of them.

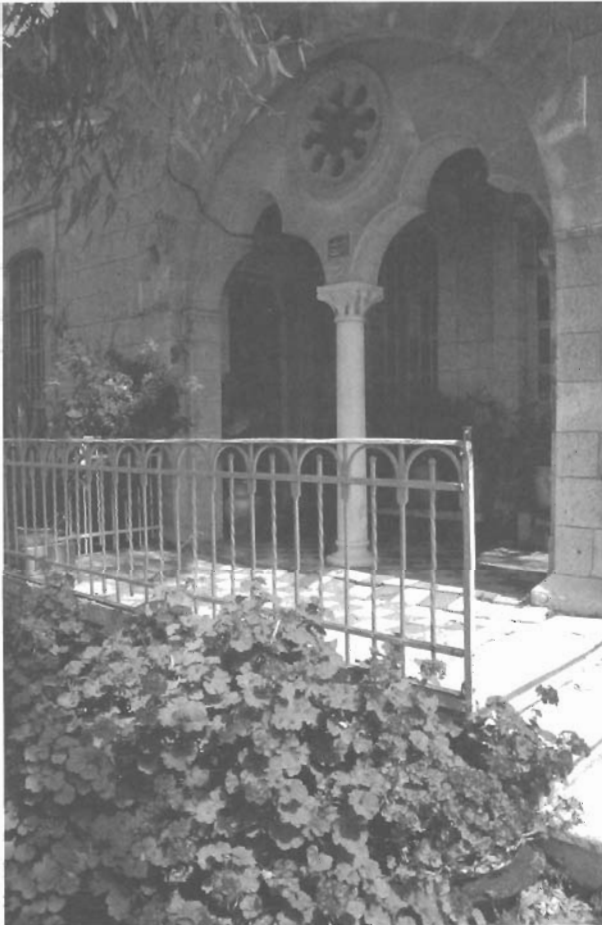
For the majority of Palestinians, queuing at passport control at any international border is always an experience of anxiety, often followed by removal from the queue while computers are checked and questions are asked. It is always a powerful reminder that one belongs to a community of failure - peoples 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 myriads of checkpoints Israel imposes in, and around, our communities in the West Bank and Gaza.

Despite the optimism of so many political and cultural theorists these days, in this case - as in many others - the border-less era of globalization offers us little promise of greater mobility.

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