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Abstract

Waiting is both a type of experience and a form of interaction. The contours assumed by the former are marked by the dynamics and features that characterize the latter. This essay addresses the waiting to which we are usually subjected when carrying out procedures in any of the instances and dependencies of the bureaucratic apparatus. Returning to the analytical contributions of Georg Simmel, a relational approach to this phenomenon is attempted, highlighting three of its basic dimensions: time, space, and interaction or reciprocal action. The essay finishes with some considerations regarding what waiting represents for modernity and, more generally, for human existence.

Keywords

waiting; relational approach; time; space; interaction; Simmel

Sobre la espera burocrática. Una aproximación simmeliana a un tiempo liminal**Resumen**

La espera es tanto un tipo de experiencia como una forma de interacción. Los contornos que asume la primera están marcados por la dinámica y los rasgos que caracterizan a la segunda. Este ensayo aborda las esperas a las que nos vemos sometidos habitualmente a la hora de realizar trámites en cualquiera de las instancias y dependencias del aparato burocrático. Volviendo a las aportaciones analíticas de Georg Simmel, se intenta una aproximación relacional a este fenómeno, destacando tres de sus dimensiones básicas: el tiempo, el espacio y la interacción o acción recíproca. El ensayo termina con algunas consideraciones sobre lo que representa la espera para la modernidad y, más en general, para la existencia humana.

Palabras clave

espera; enfoque relacional; tiempo; espacio; interacción; Simmel

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Introduction

We usually represent waiting as a monotonous and dead time in which nothing happens – at least, nothing interesting. It has been said, however, that we “label ‘monotonous and regular’ only those subtle developments we fail to examine with passionate attention” (Bachelard, [1932] 2013, p. 7). I want to examine with passionate attention that mundane situation and experience of waiting. I hope that I can thus show that, in fact, a lot happens while we wait: much of great interest, sociologically at least.¹ Of course, it is necessary to sharpen the lens and remember that “any point of existence, even if it seems to be restricted to the surface, can make contact, as if a probe were thrown, with the depths of the soul ...” (Simmel, [1903] 2017, p. 120).²

Waiting, that apparently superficial point of existence, is actually a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon. Its purpose, duration, and dynamics vary widely, as does our experience of it. It is not the same to wait for the announced arrival of a hurricane as it is to wait for a judge’s verdict. Nor is it the same, in the event of the former circumstances, to wait in a safe haven as it is to wait in a hut near the coast; similarly, it would differ, in the latter circumstance, to wait as a complainant or to wait as a defendant, when the sentence may be a fine or capital punishment. We could continue citing examples and varying the conditions, but the point is crystal clear: our experience of waiting depends largely on the features that define the specific situation in which we wait.

This essay focuses on the wait to which we are usually subjected when carrying out a procedure in one of the multiple entities of the bureaucratic apparatus. For want of a better name, I call this “bureaucratic waiting”, and I focus on it as a typical and paradigmatic experience of modernity. This delimitation by no means diminishes the aforementioned complexity and heterogeneity of the phenomenon, but it makes it a little more manageable. My intention is to analyze the typical conditions in which this waiting takes place and the way in which they can shape our experience of it. I will do this from an analytical framework also applicable to many other phenomena of social life. I take the fundamental outlines for this framework from Georg Simmel’s work, not as a finished systematic theory, but as a form of relational approach to the world. This means that, in contrast to the reifying or substantialist tendencies in social sciences, Simmel pioneered an approach that prioritizes relations and dynamic processes over discrete, static entities such as isolated individual agents and hypostasized structures external to individuals (Pyyhtinen, 2016, pp. 104-5). There are only three categorical dimensions that I wish to recover: namely time, space, and reciprocal

action. In that order, each of the following three sections will deal with a specific dimension of waiting.

1. The clock or the life

Our experience, we have known since Kant, cannot be without the form “time”. Everything that is given to us must be temporarily ordered to be the object of knowledge. As a reader of Kant, Simmel knew this well enough. The experience of the social world is also unfathomable without a time frame that lends it contours and allows it to be endowed with meaning. All action, all interaction and all social relationships can only be admitted into our consciousness in a temporary form, and although it is sometimes presented as abstract and timeless, the truth is that Simmel’s sociology offers a series of suggestive reflections on the role of time in social life. In this regard, I wish to look at two analytical distinctions. The first seems to refer, in some way, to the now classic division between an “objective” and a “subjective” dimension of time, but it must immediately be clarified that all time is “subjective”: an “internal” condition of which the so-called “objective” world knows nothing. It is more appropriate, then, to speak of an “impersonal” or “supra-individual” dimension of time and another rather “personal” or “individual” dimension for conceiving it. The first refers to a chronological order that serves as a framework for social orientation. It thus fulfills an important function by facilitating the intersubjective coordination for the performance of different tasks and activities. This ordering acquires particular relevance in modernity, since the increased functional division demands an increasingly rigid and detailed time scheme.³ Without this ordering, the complex web of exchanges and relationships would devolve into chaos. “If all the clocks in Berlin were telling the wrong time and doing it differently,” Simmel warns us, “even if it were only for the space of one hour, their entire traffic and economic life would be disrupted for a long time” (Simmel, [1903] 2017, p. 120). This is the main reason why every big city has public clocks and aims for them to be in precise synchrony, in addition to the increasing use of pocket watches. This trend goes hand-in-hand with, and is comparable to, the increase in the calculability and precision of the money economy (Simmel, [1907] 2014). However, the use of individual pocket watches should not be confused with the “personal” dimension of time. Rather, it refers to the particular way in which each of us internally experiences the aforementioned “supra-individual” scheme. Between both dimensions, there can be coupling and synchrony, but there can also be a wide gap. The urbanite, for example, as a prototype of the modern human being, *can* (in fact, *must*) internalize and respect the strict punctuality demanded by the fast pace of metropolitan life, which does not mean that they do not suffer it in their own way.

1. This invitation to analysis does not start, of course, from emptiness. Waiting has been the subject of sociological reflection since at least the 1970s, with the pioneering work of Barry Schwartz (1975). Phenomenological-oriented sociology has also provided detailed and illuminating studies, among which I highlight those of Rainer Paris (2015; 2016). In tune with this phenomenological line is also the reflection of Andreas Göttlich (2015). Finally, and without pretending to be exhaustive, I cannot fail to mention the valuable ethnographic work of Javier Auyero (2012). For a good overview of the sociological literature on waiting, see Lasse S. Hansen (2020).
2. Here and throughout, all quotations from Simmel’s works are translated by the author.
3. Our conception of time has historically changed, Norbert Elias insisted. Our symbolic syntheses about “time” vary because they are closely linked to the human need for social coordination. Elias rejected dichotomous distinctions between “objective time” and “subjective time”, “physical time” and “lived time”, “natural time” and “social time” (Elias, 1984).

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A second important distinction is that outlined by Simmel in his essay on Bergson (Simmel, [1914] 2000). There, he contrasts two radically different ways of conceiving time: we could call one “mechanistic” and the other “organic”. The first refers to a linear and punctiform notion of time in which it appears discontinuous, measurable, and calculable. This pertains to the time of physics and other exact sciences, but it is also about the everyday time of the clock, always the same as itself, unalterable in its eternal ticking. The “organic” conception, for its part, interprets time as continuous, immeasurable, and incalculable. It is governed more by events than by standardized units. It is not linear or homogeneous, but rather full of ridges, valleys, and bumps. It is the pace of life (*Tempo des Lebens*) as each person lives it at their own pace and with varying intensity. Here, a single instant can condense and mean more than everything before, be it days or even years. In fact, this conception is little concerned with days or years; such units are empty measures that say nothing about the lived time, the living time. “Thinking in a mechanistic way, we ourselves are mechanisms; thinking in a living way, we are livings” (Simmel, [1914] 2000, p. 68). Here, the influence of the *Lebensphilosophie* on our author is undeniable. Life, that ambiguous but omnipresent force, does not allow itself to be trapped by our rough intellectual instruments. Nothing new, really, but modernity exacerbates the gap between the social scheme of temporal ordering and our experience of it. The result is an alienated experience of time, which ends up manifesting as a mere empty shell (Scaff, 2005, p. 20).

The above are purely analytical distinctions, since reality exhibits all sorts of crossovers and combinations of time frames (Molseed, 1987). The “personal” dimension can assume both an “organic” and a “mechanical” format; in the same way that the “supra-personal” dimension can be guided both by a rigid but very precise “mechanistic” scheme and by a rather “organic” conception of ordering guided by historical events, agricultural cycles, or any other collectively significant phenomena.⁴ This implies that notions such as duration, speed, frequency or rhythm can take on the most varied meanings and textures, but it also implies the possibility of asynchronies and lags. However immovable and rigid a temporal scheme may seem, there will always be periods of variable duration in which, so to speak, an alternate temporality comes into force. In his article “The adventure”, Simmel observes one of those “vital islets” that contrast with everyday time, breaking its continuity and surpassing the connection of life (Simmel, [1910] 2001). I consider waiting to be another of those “vital islets”, a parenthesis that stands out against the ordinary temporal background.

Waiting is a type of experience in which time stands out, has its own profile and is problematic. In no other situation do we have such an awareness of duration (Paris, 2015, p. 135). When waiting, we carefully count the minutes and the hours that have passed. We intermittently glance at the clock, only to be astonished that less time has passed than we had imagined. The distance between “su-

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pra-personal” time in its “mechanistic” format and “personal” time in its “organic” sense leaves us disconcerted. It is difficult for us to believe the cold data of the clock, its unquestionable accuracy. Thus, anxiety grows about how much we still have to wait. However, no clock determines this; rather, it is determined by an act or event that has not yet taken place, because we do not wait for nothing, we always wait for something, and it is precisely that something that marks the end of the waiting. Meanwhile, we are pending, we are literally dependent, and our consciousness turns towards the future. For this reason, the time spent waiting is a “liminal time”, of transition towards another state of things, which always assumes the modality of “not yet” (Paris, 2015, pp. 136-7).

During waiting, time seems to acquire another consistency. It is as if minutes and hours were longer. In fact, this does not stand up to the slightest objective analysis. A minute is a minute, and an hour still has sixty of them: no more, no fewer. Nevertheless, this unobjectionable and valid fact for the “mechanistic” accounting of a “supra-personal” scheme of time has little in common with our personal experience of it. When waiting, we feel time melting into an amorphous mass. Each minute resembles the previous and the next. It is a monotonous and undifferentiated time. It is precisely that lack of differentiation and that lack of meaningful events that most contributes to the exasperating tedium we feel. What we miss are milestones or events to give it meaning: meaning, of course, from an “organic” conception of time.

Not for nothing is waiting usually conceived of as an empty, deserted, dead time. This is because our perception of it, or what we call it, is conditioned by the quantity, variety, and quality of our activities and experiences.⁵ When we are reduced to a passive state of forced inaction with nothing to do other than waiting patiently to be called, we decay emotionally. We feel and resent the lethargy of our senses, their under-excitement. Fast-paced modern life and the dynamic rhythm of its cities are also home to these “islets” of inactivity and slowdown in which time seems to stop. During these lapses, rather than enjoying a well-deserved rest, we become tired of doing nothing. At least, nothing useful or exciting and what is worse, we are unable to move from the same place. This brings us to another dimension of waiting: one to which little attention is paid, despite its importance. This dimension is space.

2. The spaces of waiting

We have already described how our experience cannot take place beyond the “time” form, it should now be noted that it cannot do so without the “space” form either. As a neo-Kantian, Simmel could not ignore this formal complement that structures our sensibility and, even more, our life in society. In fact, compared to his treatment of temporality, Simmel was much more openhanded when referring to space. Without being entirely systematic – which he

4. On the contrast between cultures whose temporality revolves around the clock and those with a notion guided instead by events, see Levine (pp. 81-100). Although it is almost unimaginable for our mostly ocularcentrist Western culture, there have been other non-visual ways of “perceiving” the passage of time. This includes not only the ringing of bells in medieval churches, but the *hsiang yin* – “aroma seal” –, an incense clock used in China until at least the 19th century whereby time is “perceived” through smell (Han, 2014, p. 59).
5. There is evidence in social psychology that shows that time is often perceived as faster when people are busy, have pleasant experiences, or simply have no urgency (Levine, 1997, p. 37).

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surely did not seek to be – he bequeathed to us some of the most enlightening sociological, philosophical and aesthetic analyses of spatiality.⁶ In this regard, I want to highlight just three of his ideas that seem fundamental to me.

Firstly, it must be clear that space is a condition of possibility for society or, in other words, for “sociation”. A necessary condition, but not an efficient cause. Space, according to Simmel, “is a form that in itself has no effect” (Simmel, [1908] 2018, p. 687). This excludes spatial determinism – in fact, determinism of any kind.⁷ If it were necessary to emphasize any one point, it would be the spiritual factors, because it is these which, to use a Simmelian expression, *are projected spatially*. This in no way means denying all relevance to space, naturalizing it or treating it as mere data. On the contrary: space plays a vital role, but its weight is not independent of our cognition and volition. It could be said that space is our representation, thanks to which we shape sensitive material, but that objectifying retroactively influences us and it is precisely there that space is again presented to us as a delimiting condition of our possibilities of action and interaction. Simmel assumes the Kantian notion of space for sociological purposes:

“Kant once defined space as «the possibility of coexistence». This is the space too, from the sociological point of view. The reciprocal action turns the previously empty space into something, into a full one *for us*, since it makes it possible.” (Simmel, [1908] 2018, p. 598)⁸

Secondly, it is important to note that in its concrete configuration, space is the result of our action and social interaction. By itself, it is nothing: just a void. Human action and interaction are what endows it with a specific form. Something as apparently obvious as a limit could lose all natural character from the moment we are reminded that it “is not a spatial fact with sociological effects, but a sociological fact that spatially forms itself” (Simmel, [1908] 2018, p. 697). It is the human spirit that – by projecting, by turning outward, by acting and interacting – imprints and leaves its mark on space. Hence, not only does a road, bridge, or gate have a practical utility in Simmel’s eyes – they also acquire aesthetic value and sociological and philosophical meaning. They say something about our being in the world. Through them, we unite what was previously separate, just as we separate what was previously united (Simmel, [1909] 2001).⁹ We lock ourselves in, only to then open up to the outside world. The “external”, in fact, is nothing more than a result of our previous action of confining ourselves in an artificially delimited scope. In short, it is only because of our social being that space makes sense, because by configuring it, we configure ourselves.

Thirdly, and in line with the above, I want to highlight the distinction between “physical distance” and “spiritual distance”.

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Although we do not have an explicit definition by Simmel, the meaning of both terms is clearly derivable from his writings. The first refers to the closeness or distance that one can share with another person or group, with such distance understood in purely geometric terms. It is about the separation that bodies occupy at different points on the same plane: a separation that range from a few centimeters to thousands of kilometers. The second refers to the proximity or distance that one can share with another, but understood instead in cultural, cognitive, and affective terms simultaneously. This designates affinity and empathy or, on the contrary, a sense of strangeness and incomprehension in relation to the other.¹⁰ “Physical distance” and “spiritual distance” can certainly coincide, as in the case of two close friends talking at a bar counter or two complete strangers communicating over a long distance. However, sociologically, it is more interesting when there is no relation between the two registers. Such is the case of two lovers separated by borders or the paradigmatic example of the stranger (*der Fremd*), at once so close and so far, in physical and spiritual terms respectively (Simmel, [1908] 2018). I say “paradigmatic” because it is an experience modernity only takes to the extreme, continually generating strangers who are close and dear friends who are far away. After all, as Simmel reminds us, “nowhere else does one feel more alone and abandoned than in the crowds of the big city” (Simmel, [1903] 2017, p. 126). It is not only loneliness, indifference, and inhibition that we can feel in a crowded urban setting, but also distrust and fear.¹¹ This variable mixture of sensations and affections to which we are prey in the midst of modern agitation acquires its own tonality in the anonymous spaces that the bureaucratic labyrinth reserves for waiting.

Waiting does not strictly demand any special requirement, not even spatial. A person, event, or action can be waited for almost anywhere. Standing or sitting; the position does not seem to matter much. Yet, there are spaces reserved for waiting, places specially predisposed and conditioned for waiting patiently while time passes. Among others, the waiting rooms and corridors of public entities constitute the favorite setting for “bureaucratic waiting”. They are impersonal, unwelcoming spaces, designed not to be stayed in longer than necessary. You are not there because you want to be, but because you have to be. These are “non-places”: liminal spaces designed for a liminal time (Augé, 2009).

With just a quick glance when entering such a place, we can get a glimpse of what lies ahead. We visualize time in space, so to speak. The number of people present is the first relevant fact to take into account (Paris, 2015, p. 159). A crowded room warns us of a possible long wait. It is a call to be patient: to sit down and wait. Faced with such a sight, there are those who turn around and leave. A semi-empty room, on the contrary, suggests a shorter

6. It is worth mentioning the two main works of Simmel in this regard: “The sociology of space” and “On spatial projections of social forms”, but also other essays such as “The metropolis and mental life”, “Excursus on the stranger”, “Bridge and door”, “Philosophy of landscape”, among others. For an overall perspective of space by Simmel, see Borden (1997).
7. Unlike the founders of geography Friedrich Ratzel and Paul Vidal de la Blanche, Simmel rather insisted on the relative autonomy of the social from any determinism, including the spatial and geographical (Ethington, 2005).
8. Without excluding other possible places, perhaps Simmel had in mind a passage where the Königsberg philosopher points out that “... perception is the representation of a reality, just as space is the representation of a mere possibility of coexistence” (Kant, [1781] 1995, <A375>).
9. “Separate” should be written, like this, in quotation marks, since we know that for Simmel there is no separation in nature, which he conceives as a unity of the whole (Simmel, [1913] 2001).
10. Philip J. Ethington refers to the Simmelian conceptual pair in terms of a “geometric” and “metaphorical” nearness or remoteness. I do not share such terminology, because for Simmel it was not a merely metaphorical matter.
11. I am grateful to Olga Sabido for calling my attention to the limits that the blasé attitude mentioned by the Berliner can find, for example, among the passengers on a subway like that of Mexico City (Sabido, 2020).

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waiting time, even if this does not ultimately transpire to be the case. However, while important, the number of people present is not everything. The body language and gestures of those present are also indicative of what happens there. Sleepy faces, yawning mouths, lazy, slow movements and bodies sprawled on rigid seats do not bode well. The waiting room is often a space laden with grief: a secular purgatory at whose entrance one might well read: "Abandon hope all ye who enter here".

The specific conformation of these spaces, as well as the explicit and implicit rules that govern them, in turn delimit the actions and interactions that may take place during the waiting. I will mention just three of the ways in which this happens.

Firstly, in such places, our mobility is limited. By waiting, we are forced to stay in a clearly delimited area, settling into a single, bound space (Paris, 2015, p. 138). Whoever wishes to absent themselves may do so only for a short period, committing to return as soon as possible. This is, of course, as long as they have the consent of whoever is next in line. If someone leaves their place in the line for no apparent reason, they risk losing it and being displaced by someone else. Solidarity has its limits here, and nothing else expresses the saying "he who goes to the fair loses his chair". On the other hand, anyone called on while not present risks the most severe of penalties: to start waiting again. Like that of Sisyphus, their previous work will have been in vain. Excuses and regrets will be of little use. Bureaucratic power likes to display itself as inflexible, because – as Andrea Köhler reminds us – "the prohibition to move has always been the prerogative of patriarchal power. He who makes us wait ties us to a place" (Köhler, 2017, p. 35).

Secondly, in these spaces, those who wait are separated from those whose decisions and actions are waited for. The aim is to reinforce the sense of distinction and hierarchy (Schwartz, 1974). In the physical structure, the differentiation of this social microcosm is projected. Walls, panels, and doors, closed or half-open, serve as a visual obstacle and a physical limit to "unauthorized personnel". The opacity of what happens inside only generates uncertainty and increases anxiety among those waiting outside. At the same time, these obstacles remove from sight and from consciousness the gestures and glances that would hardly be tolerable to any official who wants to operate *sine ira et studio*. This "physical distance" reinforces the "spiritual distance". The window is a vessel of communication between these two separate, but complementary and interacting, worlds. A whole contingent of guards, receptionists and low-level officials serve as intermediaries. They receive constant complaints and more than a few insults, as well as requests for help and information. They are the visible face and the front line of the bureaucratic apparatus, their loyalty to which is as ambiguous as their position is difficult.

Thirdly, these spaces are home to the furniture and devices necessary to project an image of order while waiting. It seeks to manage the behavior and expectations of those waiting, because

it is not merely a matter of waiting, but also of doing so with a minimal notion of the place that one occupies among others.¹² The traditional and still most common way to achieve this has been the line. One after another, people line up as they arrive, to be attended according to the classic formula of "first come, first served". The line is undoubtedly one of the clearest symbolizations of time in space.¹³ By occupying a certain place in that line, each person can calculate how long they will have to wait. While this calculation is not always accurate, the line already constitutes important progress in the process of rationalizing the waiting. The systematization and regulation of the behavior of those waiting tell of a certain order to follow and respect without discomfort or penalty. Of course, not everyone respects that order. There tends to be someone who wants to skip the line – whether covertly, by means of "influences" and "contacts", or openly, by "sneaking in", the truth is that illegitimate overtaking is a roundly rejected action. It is viewed not only as a transgression to order but also, and above all, as a lack of consideration for others. However, this is not the only drawback of the line. Despite its apparently incontestable logic, "first come, first served" is not as fair or rational as it seems. Pregnant women, the elderly and people with disabilities deserve to be served first, as is widely recognized today. Moreover, not all matters should be treated equally, nor should they all be ruled by people's order of arrival. It is more practical to classify matters and provide differentiated treatment. This step has already been taken in many instances, further streamlining the waiting process. An automatic token dispenser allocates turns in a different order than simple arrival. A screen with numbers and a robotic female voice indicates from time to time who is next, and to which window or cubicle they should proceed, but despite the apparent objectivity of these devices, the logic behind the order of succession may not be entirely clear. In other words, it is not so obvious why, for example, one might go from A1 to F18 and then jump back to C4. Putting aside for the moment the possible opacities and confusion, the important aspect is that order is staged in a performative way, tempering to some extent the anxiety of those waiting. By presenting a line of succession and assigning each person a position in it, it is projected that, no matter how slowly progress is made, sooner or later the goal will be reached. You just simply be patient; that is all.

3. Waiting for others and waiting with others

Waiting is usually conceived as the solitary state of an individual, but the truth is that it is an eminently social process. Not only are we usually forced to wait with others, physically or virtually, but even if the ultimate object of our waiting is a certain decision, this can only occur because of the actions and interactions of others. This is precisely what is lost from sight; all the more reason to stress

12. On the contrary, the constant change of the requirements, the contradictory information and the arbitrariness in the waiting patterns generate disorienting effects (Auyero, 2012, pp. 17, 73-74).

13. This way of "ordering" the waiting facilitates the appearance of the "seat-saver": someone who sells their place or, in other words, rents their body out to occupy a certain place in the line. It does not take much to act as a "seat-saver", and yet this can be a profitable business in certain public dependencies and institutions. Wherever there is annoyance and discomfort, there will be people willing to pay to avoid it, just as there will also be people willing to receive money in exchange for enduring it.

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the importance of a relational approach. Simmel invites us to observe processes and relationships where others would see nothing but static entities, individuals, and things. Social life involves continuous doing and enduring; it is interaction or reciprocal action (*Wechselwirkung*). Although reciprocal actions are counted in the thousands and millions, and even though the concrete “contents” that interact vary extremely, what is sociologically relevant is that the “forms” that such reciprocal actions assume tend to repeat themselves and display similar features, even in the most heterogeneous and remote areas (Simmel, [1903] 2017, pp. 62-87). Conflict, competition, cooperation, and domination are, among others, examples of these “forms”. They are certainly relative terms, because, as the author warns us, “what in a certain relationship and seen from above, is presented as a *form*, in another relationship and seen from below, has to be considered content” (Simmel, [1908] 2018, p. 492). The important aspect, at least for pure or formal sociology, is to abstract these “forms”, setting aside for a moment the variety of their “contents”.

In the specific case that concerns us, it is interesting to analyze the most notable features of this “form” of reciprocal action: waiting for others’ actions and decisions. I will attempt to do this on two levels, focusing first on the relationship that exists between those who wait and those who are waited for, and then exclusively addressing the relationship between those who wait, especially those who do so while sharing the same space.

Asymmetry is the first characteristic of the relationship between those who wait and those whose actions and decisions are waited for. Such asymmetry rests on the fact that the former have a resource that the latter lack, namely the powers, however limited, conferred by the bureaucratic authority (Weber, 1922, chap. 3, para. 3-4). The power to mediate or directly make decisions that affect others is part of the attributions and responsibilities of those occupying a position in the public administration. Certainly, it is not an unlimited power, and it is controlled by all kinds of regulations, but there is ample room for maneuver in the effective behavior of officials. If time is a resource, as is usually accepted, its value varies considerably on either side of the window or the desk. Not only are officials generally unwilling to wait, they are also the ones who can allow others to wait for them.¹⁴ Having someone else’s time is not only a sign of inequality but also a discreet, if very effective, vehicle for exercising domination.¹⁵ For an indeterminate period of time, an individual is forced to remain passively in the same place, and most of the time such a mandate is obediently followed. Waiting is, therefore, part of what Javier Auyero calls the “invisible tentacles” of the State and its bureaucratic apparatus. It is one of those mechanisms of discipline that serve to form submissive subjects of the State rather than active citizens who demand dignified treatment and respect for their rights (Auyero, 2012, pp. 58-63).

Closely linked to the above is a second essential feature: dependency. Those who wait depend on others in whose power it is not only to determine the result of the procedure in question but

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also the possibility of speeding up, slowing down, or even stopping the whole process. This implies that the waiting time of the person waiting can be shortened or extended by the action or omission of the other person. The doing of one is the suffering of the other, or rather, the not doing of the one is the despair of the other (Paris, 2015, p. 142). The effect of this is twofold. On the one hand, aware of their advantageous position, an official can take advantage, reward or punish, in particular or in general, those who wait. On the other hand, by depending on another, we rightly or wrongly hold that person responsible for any delay that may arise, accusing them of inefficiency or apathy in their work. We victimize ourselves, speculating on some hidden agenda behind the delay. It is true that dependency is not absolute; there is always the possibility of unilaterally stopping the wait, of simply saying: “I have come this far, I cannot take it anymore”. However, we could only do so at the price of giving up the very object of the waiting, and the stakes are often so high that the very idea of giving up is discarded straight away. Such an extreme decision would mean that all the waiting had been in vain: mere wasted time. Hope is certainly not the last thing to be lost. Often, what prompts the continued waiting is nothing more than stubbornness.¹⁶ Even without high expectations, we continue to wait. Why? Because of the mere fact of having already waited. It is as if, by doing this, we make the time invested so far worthwhile.¹⁷ Then, not only does the present seem to be anxiously turning towards the future, but the past also casts its enveloping shadow over it.

Limiting ourselves now to the relationship established between those who wait, what we observe is a situation that, taking up a Sartrean notion, Rainer Paris has described as mere “seriality” (Paris, 2015, p. 139). Those who are in line in a corridor or next to each other in a waiting room do not, therefore, constitute a unit. Starting with the complete absence of a collective identity, much is still needed for them to be considered a group and not merely an aggregate. Everyone seems to be on his or her own. The others are just that: others, strangers. In their pure anonymity and simple co-presence, it seems that it is of little interest that they may be going through the same situation. “Physical proximity” in this specific case does not imply “spiritual proximity”. At best, I am indifferent to the others; at worst, they represent a nuisance. This applies particularly to those who precede me, since they seem to hinder my progress and prolong my wait; conversely, it is likely that I too am a hindrance to those who succeed me, because if I were not here, they would take my place and be served sooner (Paris, 2015, pp. 139, 166).

The relationship with others not only varies widely, but also often goes through different stages. After an initial, relatively brief phase of scrutinizing curiosity, indifference and even a certain suspicion towards others soon tend to prevail. After the initial setting, that state of mind that Simmel called a “blasé attitude” then ensues. It is not a mere internal condition, without effect on others. Whoever seeks to withdraw from the immediate environment signals this through body language and gestures. With the use of

14. Inequality and power find a clear expression in what Levine calls “the rules of the waiting game” (Levine, 1997 pp. 118-9).

15. I follow here Max Weber’s conceptual distinction between “power” and “domination” (Weber, 1922, para. 16).

16. Suffice it to remember here the apparent poise of the colonel and the painful companionship of his wife in Gabriel García Márquez’s novel (García Márquez, [1961] 2014).

17. This could be a mistake, which Dobelli describes as “the sunk cost fallacy”: that is, when thirty minutes after having entered the cinema, the person decides that the film is bad but still decides to stay, as if it would make it worthwhile to have already invested half an hour of their time (Dobelli, 2014, pp. 22-3).

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headphones, the reading of a book or many other similar resources, the inclination to ignore others and to be ignored is announced. This curious mixture of inhibition and distancing can eventually be interrupted. The anxiety generated by the waiting sometimes leads to seeking information from others. The person is asked if they have been there before, how the process works, and other details. This can give rise to a wide range of stories about one's own and others' experiences: some true and others embellished with all sorts of exaggerations, but the really important aspect in any case is to break the ice. By making contact, listening, and exchanging impressions with the other, the person becomes a little less strange and a little less distant. How to take that first step without exposing yourself and without falling into indiscretion at the same time? This is a typically Simmelian paradox, the solution to which does not allow for formulae. The balanced handling of interactions and reciprocal knowledge is an art rather than a technique: the art of touch.¹⁸ Now, it must be recognized that it is not only knowledge that we seek in the other, but perhaps something less admissible: an opportunity to distract ourselves. Along with the traditional crossword puzzle and the modern mobile phone, conversations with neighbors are a way to avoid boredom. However superficial the talk may be, it helps in some small way to forget the relentless passage of time, but as soon as one is called, as soon as the waiting is over, the other will inevitably pale into insignificance. Again, it must be said: solidarity has its limits. Perhaps Schopenhauer was right when he said that boredom "makes men, who love each other so little, look for each other eagerly" (Schopenhauer, [1819] 1996, para. 57, p. 430).

I leave here these brief annotations, hoping to have shown that there is much of sociological interest in waiting, as well as the way in which time, space, and reciprocal actions intervene in and shape our experience of it. What has been said so far can, of course, be expanded upon and completed with other important dimensions of human experience, such as corporeity and the senses, aspects to which Georg Simmel also contributed in a pioneering way.

4. Final considerations

I conclude this essay with two final considerations: one diagnostic and the other more speculative. Regarding the first, it is worth remembering that modernity seemed to promise a substantial reduction in waiting times (Köhler, 2017, p. 64). The constant revolution in means of transport and communication meant the conversion of "all waiting and all useless displacement into an irretrievable waste of time" (Simmel, [1903] 2017, p. 120).

In "late modernity", as Hartmut Rosa has emphasized with particular insistence, a temporary regime tends to predominate, the essential principle of which is "acceleration": of technology, of social change, of the pace of life (Rosa, 2005). Everything seems to point to a state of affairs in which the speed of transformation

barely gives respite or leaves us time to think. But, without doubting the plausibility of this diagnosis, I think it is in our interests not to lose sight of that other side of modern life where time slows down and seems to stop at times. Bureaucracy, whose purpose was to rationalize and accelerate the administrative processes of the modern State, has ended up often producing all kinds of irrationalities, inefficiency and wastes of time. In other words, neither acceleration nor bureaucratic rationalization has ended waiting. It persists and reappears everywhere as an eternal return of the repressed. Hence again the call to pay closer and more passionate attention to waiting and other similar situations generated as an unwanted effect by acceleration trends themselves.¹⁹

Such a call should not be confused, however, with that ode to waiting that has been recruiting more and more followers. I refer to the voices that, in recent years, have called for a return to slowness in the midst of busy modern life. These come primarily from authors of the humanities and literary studies who have elected to see in waiting that pause for leisure and calm reflection that we so lack.²⁰ Nevertheless, the problem of which these authors generally lose sight is that the waiting that we face on a daily basis usually bears the stamp of unwillingness. We are forced to wait passively under little or no stimulating conditions, and it is precisely this forced nature that we resent the most. It is true that the occasion can sometimes be used to take a break and see things from another perspective. Ideally, such breaks could be taken at will, in spaces more pleasant than a row of rigid seats, surrounded by jaded people. This is - I repeat - what those who romantically idealize waiting forget, as if it were always a time of contemplation, where an epiphany could strike at any moment. However, setting aside such rare examples as those of Kafka and Handke, the rest of us mere mortals simply suffer waiting as a passivity imposed on us by others.

I wish to complement this critical-diagnostic consideration with another of an existential kind. From childhood, Andrea Köhler observes, we are subjected to a process of discipline in waiting. When, as children, we are told that we must do our homework before going to play or that we must wait for Christmas Eve to open our gifts, what we are being taught deep down is to wait and develop the acclaimed but difficult virtue of patience (Köhler, 2017, pp. 29-31). We are then disciplined in the postponement of gratification, thus preparing us for the future waits of adult life. I mention Köhler's suggestive remark because I want to propose a somewhat bolder interpretation.

I think that life itself is a collection of waits in which we are socialized from early childhood and beyond that all the waits in this life, including those of the kind that I have called "bureaucratic waiting", are at once a paradigmatic image and a kind of training for the even deeper "existential waiting". I understand by the latter that type of experience and situation in which every human being exists, by the mere fact of being human. We are the only animal aware of its finitude: aware that, sooner or later, death awaits us.

18. About the sense of touch and discretion see: (Simmel, [1906] 2017, pp. 108-115; Simmel, [1917] 2017, pp. 108-9; Simmel, [1908] 2018, pp. 395-400).

19. Hartmut Rosa himself proposes as an example of this "slowdown" the traffic jams resulting from the "accelerating" tendency to travel in our own cars (Rosa, 2013, pp. 18, 57).

20. However dissimilar their motives and thoughts, we find among these voices Luciano Concheiro (2016), Carl Honoré (2005), and Andrea Köhler (2017). The greatest expression of this benevolent conception of waiting is found in Harold Schweizer, who, despite being fully aware of its forced nature, maintains that "waiting can be a rewarding experience, (...) and that waiting is an essential condition for aesthetic and ethical values", where "in listening to the inward melody of duration, we become attuned to our being" (Schweizer, 2008, pp. 126, 128).

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Whether or not we interpret this situation religiously, the truth is that we cannot move or go anywhere else. We are condemned to wait, and we count time meticulously, but no longer in minutes and hours, but in years and decades. We try to take advantage of that time in activities that most of the time are nothing more than *divertissement*: mere entertainment that distracts us from the ambiguous and uncomfortable existential situation in which we find ourselves.²¹ There is, however, a fundamental difference between “bureaucratic waiting” and the one that I have termed “existential”. While in the first we yearn for the waiting to end as soon as possible, in the second we are seeking to extend our time as much as possible. After the so-called “death of God”, we try to stay in this vale of tears as long and as happily as possible. Given our orphan spirituality, we are continually offered all kinds of quick and easy ways out, from the most orthodox skepticism to the eternal wandering from one substitute for faith to another. Yet, according to a disciple of Simmel, the wisest thing is to be patient and keep waiting (Kracauer, 1977). What do we have to wait for? For the end of the waiting, which, in this case, only comes with death. Hopefully, as in Beckett's wonderful work (Beckett, [1955] 2011), where Vladimir and Estragon have each other, we too learn to wait in solidarity: next to each other, not only *physically* but *spiritually*.

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21. I echo here what was said by Blaise Pascal in his thought no. 139 (Pascal, [1670] 2015).

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