

A photograph of a weathered wooden door set in a rough, earthen wall. The door is made of vertical wooden planks, some of which are painted a faded teal color. A metal padlock is attached to the door. The wall is made of light brown, textured earth. The overall scene suggests a sense of waiting or a closed-off space.

WAITING

A PROJECT IN CONVERSATION

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[transcript] Culture & Theory

From:

Shahram Khosravi (ed.)

Waiting – A Project in Conversation

January 2021, 190 p., pb., 20 b&w ill., 27 col. ill.

28,00 € (DE), 978-3-8376-5458-5

E-Book:

PDF: 24,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-5458-9

Waiting is an inescapable part of life in modern societies. We all wait, albeit differently and for different reasons. What does it mean to wait for a long period of time? How do people narrate their waiting? Waiting is about the senses. If you do not sense it, there is no waiting. We sense waiting in the form of boredom, despair, anxiety and restlessness, but also anticipation and hope. Prolonged waiting is like insomnia – a state of wakefulness, a kind of mood, an emotional state. But it is also about politics; affecting and affected by gender, citizenship, class, and race.

Blending ethnography, philosophy, poetry, art, and fiction, this book is a collection of works by scholars, visual artists, writers, architects and curators, exploring different forms of waiting in diverse geographical contexts, and the enduring effects of history, power, class, and coloniality.

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For further information:

www.transcript-verlag.de/en/978-3-8376-5458-5

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Preface

Shahram Khosravi

The idea for this book came about from a failure, as I began to realise that the research project on waiting which I had been working on did not make sense when presented in a purely academic form. I failed to discuss the concept or practices of waiting in a format suitable for peer-reviewed journals, higher seminars and conference papers. Over the last decade I have conducted different, yet somehow interconnected fieldwork which directly or indirectly relates to waiting, time, and temporalities; from vulnerable young people in Iran, to following irregular migrants stuck in various camps in Greece, to deportees to Afghanistan. I've seen many people in prolonged situations of waiting and have listened to countless stories about their lived experiences of temporal stuckedness, however, every time I attempted to transform these experiences and stories into academic texts I felt like a failure. Why?

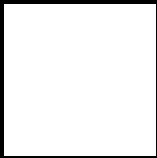
I have no answers, only vague guesses. Waiting is about the senses. If you do not sense it, there is no waiting. We sense waiting in the form of boredom, despair, anxiety and restlessness, but also anticipation and hope. Prolonged waiting is like insomnia—a state of wakefulness, a kind of mood, an emotional state. But it is also about politics; affecting and affected by gender, citizenship, class and race. It surfaces in the gaps between trust and betrayed promises, between expectations and coloniality.

I decided to approach waiting with the help of visual artists, poets, architects, fiction writers, photographers and curators who have worked on the theme. They generously accepted my invitation and joined me in a conversation on waiting. Their works in this book cover different forms of waiting, over diverse geographies, and with attention to key aspects such as gender, class, and race.

I am deeply indebted to them for sharing their work in this book. I am also grateful to Jacek Smolicki, Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn, Maryam Omrani, Paolo Favero, Behzad Khosravi Noori, Erling Björgvinsson, Sarah Philipson Isaac, Annika Lindberg and Mahmoud Keshavarz for their intellectual engagement in this project. Many thanks to Christine Jacobsen at the University of Bergen and other members of the research project WAIT for a long and inspiring conversation on waiting. I also thank Dagmawi Yimer for the pleasure I had in our collaboration for making the video *Waiting* in the Summer of 2019. I thank Matthew Ashton for his contribution to the book's graphic design and layout. Thank you to the Research Council of Norway and the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research for financial support.

Finally the ones who are thanked without any particular reason are Nina, Kian, and Mimi.

The result is in your hands. I hope you enjoy the book as much as I did.



The Weight of Waiting

Shahram Khosravi

This book took its final form during the COVID-19 pandemic when the whole world was waiting, and as I write these words in July 2020, it still seems suspended in uncertainty. During the current global lockdown, nobody knows what is awaiting us and, even worse, what exactly we are waiting for; the world is bored.

People from East to West are waiting for a return to their 'normal' life. We all wait, but we wait differently. While the wealthy wait in self-isolation on private islands, others cannot afford quarantine. The poor cannot afford to wait. Reports coming from different corners of the world testify that the poor and marginalised are dying at disproportionate rates compared with more privileged members of society. While the pandemic affects everyone, disregarding race and class, the consequences of the outbreak are diverse, just like waiting. We all wait, but the experience of waiting is different for different people. Prolonged waiting not only engenders new vulnerabilities, but also aggravates vulnerabilities that are already present, revealing socio-political regulations that result in an unequal distribution of risk and hope. Waiting is not a neutral condition, but rather a hierarchical interwoven complex of gender, race, and class. Waiting, thus, is pre-eminently a political issue.

One of the basic divisions in the world today is between those who are forced into protracted conditions of waiting and those who impose it. Waiting is a particular experience of time, and has become a powerful technique for the regulation of social interactions between individuals, as well as between individuals and the authorities.

Waiting is a dialectical relationship in which the logic of *waiting for* and *to be waited for* meet—a matter of power relations through the manipulation of others' time. When in contact with bureaucracy, individuals wait for their turn and for the officials' decisions. Being kept in a state of protracted waiting is used as a dramaturgical means of mystification and an expression of power¹—to keep people waiting, without ruining their hope, is an exercise of power over other people's time² in order to preserve dependency and subordination. The neoliberal technologies of citizenship enacted through keeping people waiting for jobs, education, housing, health care, social welfare, or pensions turn citizens into 'patients of the state.'³

Protracted waiting and mystification make life unpredictable and engenders uncertainties, generating the feeling that one is not fully in command of one's life. Marginalised groups find themselves in a race against time, with a sense of being 'left behind' of what is assumed to be the natural rhythm of modern life, lacking the power to go forward.

When social life is suspended one feels a lack of integration into 'national time.' Suffering from perpetual suspension and the predicament of being 'stuck,' in a prolonged wait for a job, a house, an education, marriage, a visa, or asylum, makes people feel out of sync with others and surrounded by a growing sense of disconnectedness. Time is often associated with success and money and waiting therefore symbolises waste, emptiness and uselessness—there is a discrepancy

1 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1959).

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

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

between common social goals (speed, mobility, the idea that time is money) and the reality of individuals' socio-political capacities, with more and more people feeling unable to move forward in life at the speed expected of larger society.

This systemic mismatch has made waiting a central element to the relationship between everyday life and capitalism. The last century was one of promising images and dreams of welfare, a stable life cycle, *law and order*, distribution of human rights, and in some parts of the world, equal distribution of wealth and social justice. While we have witnessed these promises slowly fade away, we no longer know anymore exactly what we are waiting for—this is what makes capitalism boring. Walter Benjamin writes in the Arcades Project that “we are bored when we do not know what we are waiting for” and then asks, “what is the dialectical antithesis to boredom?”⁴ His answer is awakening into a historical wakefulness.

A few years ago, Neda, a young Iranian woman, told me that the whole of her childhood was spent waiting for asylum in Germany. When she was in her late teens, one day her mother rushed into her room screaming with joy and showed her a letter saying their application had finally been approved. Then Neda started crying and asked: “did we suffer so much and for so long just for a piece of paper?”

The moment Neda felt she had lost her childhood waiting for “a piece of paper” was the moment she experienced time in its historical and political sense. The moment of realising that one’s time is killed and stolen is the moment that waiting time is demystified and is unpacked from its ideological layers. It is the moment waiting time appears denaturalised and therefore also historicised.⁵ It is when Neda became aware of the meaningless purpose of her waiting, since “the piece of paper” did not change anything about their socio-economic

4 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 105.

5 Omid Mehrgan, “Az Zaman-e Baghimandeh,” *Herfeh Honarmand*, No 41. (Spring 1391/2012): 163–171.

condition, but rather commenced a new waiting; “to be integrated into German society.” Shocked by a sudden uncertainty about *what* exactly she had been waiting for and accordingly *why*, Neda was overwhelmed by a profound ennui. Neda’s ennui should not be reduced to bafflement, an emotional reaction to the long and painful wait for only “a piece of paper,” but rather it should be seen as a significant political interrogation. Experiencing ennui and being bored, in Benjaminian meaning, is productive, engendering consciousness about the social and political condition of waiting. Awakening from a purposeless waiting is a transformation. For Benjamin, the revolutionary energies of boredom are exactly this; “boredom is the threshold to great deeds.”⁶ While crossing the threshold one “takes in the time and renders it up in altered form—that of expectation.”⁷ Expectation is a transformation of time, pregnant with potentialities and possibilities for a counter-mood to boredom.

When the illusion that we know what we are waiting for is replaced by an awareness of the emptiness and boredom of waiting, new subjectivities emerge and there is a chance for revolutionary pessimism.

The revolutionary unwaiting

Historical wakefulness out of an awaiting without an object emerges from pain. The word patience comes from the Latin word *pati*, which means ‘to suffer.’ As Dostoevsky famously put it—“suffering is the sole origin of consciousness.”⁸ Suffering may indeed lead to perplexity over all hardships during waiting; but it may also raise significant political questions and demands for understanding *what* waiting has been about.

6 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 105.

7 *Ibid.*, 107.

8 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground* (1861; repr., London: Alma Classics, 2014), 32.

Hence, it is no accident that etymologically, the word *wait* is derived from the words *to watch* and *to be awake*. Waiting engenders wakefulness and vigilance. Waiting is being in a state of consciousness. The person in a state of waiting constantly thinks about her or his waiting. Waiting means constantly updating oneself about the social and political condition waiting has imposed on her or him. Wakefulness makes waiting similar to insomnia, that is, a compulsion to be *vigilant* and pay attention to what is happening around oneself. Similar to the one who waits, the insomniac thinks about the reasons for her insomnia and seeks relief from it. This aspect of waiting is even more palpable in the French verb *attendre*, which means *to direct one's mind toward*. A waiting-towards the not-yet is attentive and oriented.

What keeps the person awake in prolonged waiting is not measuring chronological time, *Chronos*; but chasing moments of potential opening, *Kairos*. Approaching waiting as a state of wakeful navigation and vigilance here refers to the qualities of time, what Greeks called *Kairos*, i.e. critical moments when things can happen and openings for changes may ensue. Lack of mobility in time and space associated with waiting (usually expressed as *going nowhere in life*), does not mean lack of mobilisation. Navigation through the spatio-temporal contexts of waiting might create openings for new political orientations. An interesting example are protests by migrants and refugees—from Moria camp on the Greek island of Lesbos and Calais in the north France, to the striking mobilisations of the inmates in Australia's notorious detention centre on Manus Island, and sit-in protests in major European cities—triggering a subjectivity through the actions of politics. For these people, waiting has become a state of wakefulness engaged with potentialities for a different future.

The future is not a section of a linear timeline, which will come after the present, but is rather in a constant dialectical relationship with the present. All struggles, strategies and tactics, navigations and wakefulness of waiting are animated through the constant interplay between the now and the not-yet. Waiting (the now) is not suspended time oriented through a temporal progression towards a future (end

of waiting); but rather, the now and the not-yet constantly make and remake each other. Dialectical wakefulness between the now and the not-yet generates hopeful visions and practices. Even in the form of daydreaming, these practices are agentive. Daydreaming, orienting oneself toward not-yet fulfilled promises, is pre-eminently a political act by which people claim their right to potentialities that make prospects for a better future possible.

Waiting is not a static condition but rather a process and a practice. Waiting as wakeful navigation through material struggles in the present and 'directing one's mind toward' the not-yet, is a daily practice. For people who are constantly delayed and sent back to 'square one,' there is no end to waiting, but rather an endless struggle to withstand waiting and to demand change.

As I write these words, the world is witnessing a powerful *Black Lives Matter* movement in the United States and Europe—a growing anti-racism movement which has also become a mobilisation to force the former colonial countries to confront their racist histories.

The potentiality of the *Black Lives Matter* movement for political change is rooted in a profound ennui which is a result of a prolonged wait for justice. The awareness (boredom) that their waiting has not been defined by something (justice) that is yet to arrive, but rather by something that was never supposed to arrive, leads to the will to put an end to waiting—a radical will to unwait. Perhaps no one better than Martin Luther King expressed this radical unwaiting, who in his well-known letter written in a cell in Birmingham jail eloquently explained *why they can't wait*:

For years now, I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."⁹

9 Martin Luther King, *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Penguin Group, 1964), 80–81.

Waiting for justice is assigned to those groups in society whose time is assumed to be less worth. The poor, racialised citizens, minorities, migrants, women, and prisoners all feel the weight of waiting on their shoulders more than others. The question is no longer what they are waiting for, but why they keep waiting for something that will never come.

Embedded in Neda's question, "did we suffer so much and for so long just for a piece of paper?" and refugee protests stuck by and between borders, and in the *Black Lives Matter* movements we can see a connectedness and continuum of experiences which are related to history and communities. The revolutionary potentiality in these instances is in the connectedness and the communicability of experiences. For Benjamin this transformation is when isolated experiences (*Erlebnis*) are linked to collective, accumulated, historical experiences (*Erfahrung*) and individual experiences are brought together and are historicised.¹⁰ Martin Luther King's call for *unwaiting* is a call for all people for whom justice has been too long delayed and denied.

During the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015, hundreds of thousands of people crossed many borders on foot through the Balkans. Along the way they tuned train stations into bedrooms, train platforms into living rooms, abandoned carriages into kitchens, airport arrival and departure halls into waiting rooms, and walls into notebooks for messages and signs—leaving traces of themselves behind in the places they passed through. The following photographs (pp. 20-25) are taken in these places in search of remnants of hope; Idomeni, Lesbos, and Athens.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).