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Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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The architectures of waiting: Helmut Puff and Bernardo Zacka in conversation

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Critical Exchange

The architectures of waiting: Helmut Puff and Bernardo Zacka in conversation

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> Waiting is what we do most of the time, and few of us are very good at it. Bureaucracies have seized this advantage, and have made waiting an institutional practice (Corcoran, 1989, p. 511)

We are a historian of early modern Europe and a political theorist brought together by an interest in the architectures of waiting. What do the spaces in which we wait tell us about the temporal sensibilities that accompany the experience of waiting and the structures of power that underlie it? How do these spaces in turn shape the subjectivities and collectivities of those assembled in expectant idleness? The conversation we share below originated in an interdisciplinary symposium, for which Helmut Puff interviewed Bernardo Zacka about his research on the frontline delivery of public services. What we offer here is a lightly edited and expanded version of the transcript of that conversation—an exchange between a scholar investigating early modern antechambers and another studying the antechambers of the welfare state.

Like many other pervasive features of social life, waiting is socially patterned. In a study on the work of women in hospitality and their representation, Irina Aristarkhova reminds us that 'waiting is not expected equally of all people' (2020, p. 29). Variations in waiting time reflect the distribution of power in a social system and are one of the ways in which such a distribution is maintained. This, at least, is what the sociologist Barry Schwartz (1974) concluded in his seminal account of how delays shape interactions in modern businesses, hospitals, publishing houses, and the like. While waiting is often occasioned by limitations in access to goods and services, its significance cannot be understood simply by reference to imbalances between supply and demand. Its devaluating and dramaturgical aspects are beholden to social, cultural, and psychological dynamics too. Among other things, how people wait—the time spans they are made to wait, their willingness to wait, their discontent with having to wait, the meaning they attribute to the wait, etc.—varies according to race, class, gender, profession, context, and culture, and is informed by the scenography of the wait in ways that require further study.

'[W]e know comparatively little about the social organization of time', Schwartz posited in 1975 (p. 1). In 1989, Paul E. Corcoran even claimed that the social sciences had largely ignored the topic of waiting, the works of Henri Bergson, Émile Durkheim, and Marcel Mauss notwithstanding. What may have held true then is no longer the case, however. In recent years, research in anthropology, sociology, philosophy, literary criticism, queer studies, and political theory (see, for example, Cohen, 2018; Rose, 2016) has uncovered the multiform politics,

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aesthetics, and psychologies of waiting, 'a temporally bounded condition in which time becomes experiential' (Puff, 2019, p. 19).

Waiting is a state often remembered or narrated as miserable, unsettling, and disempowering. At the same time, critics have also unearthed productive qualities attributable to it. An intricate nexus of inactivity and activity, waiting often evidences as a bodily tension that can stimulate as well as immobilize. Joseph Vogl (2011) observes that creativity relies on tarrying, calling into question the basic distinction between contemplating and acting.

While waiting is a temporal state endured individually, it can also acquire a collective timbre. Colonial societies were once consigned to the 'waiting room of history' until they were supposedly ready for self-determination or modernity (Chakrabarty, 2011, p. 663f.). Whether one thinks of nations or other communities, anthropologists have shown that the experience of waiting frequently induces forms of collective intentionality or even agency in those who wait. The languishing sentiment of 'waiting for something, anything, to happen' tied South African whites together before the end of apartheid (Crapanzano, 1985, p. 42f.). In institutional settings, like hospital waiting rooms, waiting orients those who are present toward the future, be it immediate or further afield. For those in need of assistance, for migrants, and for jobseekers, prolonged temporal intervals, which often compound other heart-wrenching precarities, are formative for a person's sense of self and expressive of their social standing. Among university graduates in India, waiting for employment and displaying the wait publicly offers opportunities to mobilize politically and experience solidarity, if not companionship (Jeffrey, 2010). In Argentina's social agencies, those waiting to receive assistance from the state exchange information, stories, food, and mutual support for childcare (Auyero, 2012).

What remains constant across these works on the social organization of waiting is the challenge that interstitial temporizations, while integral to the social fabric as well as to processes of becoming, are ephemeral and therefore difficult to access or study systematically. In memoirs and oral histories, which provide a valuable window into the past, waiting is often passed in silence, the plot leaping over it as if it were dead time. One can observe people waiting in the present or probe their recollections of the experience of waiting, but if one were to approach them as they are waiting, they would no longer be.

Architectures of waiting, which envelop and outlast individual experiences, thus offer a potent heuristic to trace specific modalities of waiting. Spaces built and designated for people to spend time manifest the societal mandate for timing human interactions through pauses. As a result, they shed light not only on the waiters but also on those social actors, members of the elites and bureaucracies, that make others wait. Rooms designated for waiting are more than spatial containers: they are affective spaces. They and their protocols or rituals affect the waiters in ways that demand critical analysis. Schwartz touched on the impact of such spaces when discussing the 'atmosphere of the waiting room' as something that can be intentionally orchestrated to produce a certain effect (1975, p. 140).

The term 'architectures of waiting' derives from a catalog by the photographer Ursula Schulz-Dornburg (2007). Her images of derelict bus stops in post-Soviet Armenia show built structures and waiters exposed to the vagaries of the elements and of political change. In its modernistic designs, this infrastructure is a monument to a promised socialist future that never came to be. Vestibules, antechambers, corridors, *salles d'attente* in railway stations, airport lounges, public transport stops, non-places (Augé, 1995), and virtual waiting rooms are all reminders of the fact that while waiting itself is a constant, how we wait has changed throughout history in ways that deserve to be explored and investigated.

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Our theme, then, is that of spending time expecting something to happen in a designated space, and our wager is that the architecture of waiting spaces has the potential to reveal and inflect temporal sensibilities and shed light on the constitution of individual subjectivities and collective orientations. What better focal point for a conversation across disciplines, time periods, and methods? All too often, comparisons across time and place have served as foils to establish what is distinct about the modern by contrast to what came before, or about the west in relation to other parts of the world. As we see it, both similarities and differences are in evidence and have the potential to mutually illuminate the intersection of times, comportments, and architectures. What sort of spaces have societies built to accommodate or impose involuntary lingering? How can spatiality morph the experience and meaning of time spent waiting? Let us suspend our answers for a bit longer and linger ourselves for a moment in the pasts and futures of waiting.

Helmut Puff and Bernardo Zacka

Interview

Helmut Puff (HP): In your book, *When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency* (2017), you reflect on the quandaries employees in social service administrations experience in the US today. You offer a social portrait of those who are the face of the state: bureaucrats—their decisions, their agency, their eventful everyday. I'm curious. Political theory as a field thrives on abstractions. Your project relies on fieldwork. What inspired you to volunteer at an anti-poverty agency?

Bernardo Zacka (BZ): Thank you, Helmut, for inviting me to discuss my work with you. Yes, political theory typically deals in abstractions, which can be very valuable to distill the essence of a phenomenon. But I think we ought to be careful about them too. Abstractions acquire a life of their own and sometimes become an obstacle to seeing what is before our eyes. My work is loosely inspired by an anthropological or phenomenological sensibility. I try to approach familiar political institutions with a studied naiveté, temporarily suspending the abstractions through which we describe them to capture how they actually manifest themselves. When it comes to the welfare state, this means taking seriously the idea that the state is, in the first instance, *someone, somewhere*—a person you meet in a place.

There's a personal background to this. I'm Lebanese, and when I think about how the state or political authority used to manifest itself to me growing up, the image that comes to mind is that of a checkpoint. You're driving a car and suddenly you find yourself face-to-face with a soldier or official peering into your vehicle. It's a very personal encounter. You're not quite sure what they're empowered to do. You have no idea whether they're following rules or not. It feels very contingent, and there's something important or charged in that contingency.

Yet when I started studying political theory much later, these personal interactions with people who are the face of the state or embodiments of political authority were nowhere to be seen. Theorists were by and large concerned with whether laws were just and institutions legitimate. But our everyday, ordinary interactions with the state seemed to have largely fallen from view.

The idea for *When the State Meets the Street* started with a simple thought: what if we begin with the observation that the state is someone, somewhere, and try to apprehend it as such? What sorts of questions would arise? It's one of those problematizing re-descriptions where a familiar entity suddenly becomes quite strange. You quickly realize that the actions of frontline

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bureaucrats are actually not spelled out entirely by the law. There is, of course, a legal framework, and there are public policies. But they remain quite indeterminate and incomplete. A lot of discretion is involved. Then the question becomes: how do people use their discretion? If you want to think about that, you also need to think about what sorts of dispositions bureaucrats bring with them to work, and how these dispositions are shaped by the pressures they encounter at work. That opens up a range of questions about the administrative state that are not at the forefront of political theory but about which theorists, I think, have much to say.

HP: This is fascinating. I grew up in West Germany. Crossing the border into East Germany or any country behind the Iron Curtain meant crossing checkpoints at the border. But our interactions were scripted. Border guards had been told not to interact with travelers. You could not joke with them, for instance. That would have worked against you in all kinds of ways.

BZ: It's interesting you say this. When I began the project, I was keen on writing about Lebanon. The reaction I would inevitably get from American political scientists was the following: of course, there's contingency in interactions with frontline officials, but that's because there is no rule of law. I'm not sure that's an accurate statement about the Lebanese state, but I didn't want to write a book about that. That's why I eventually chose to move the project analytically to places that are considered to be advanced liberal democracies like the US, places that supposedly abide by the rule of law, where there are checks on the use of discretion, large bureaucratic agencies, and so on. I wanted to show that even there—in this supposedly 'harder case'—a substantial measure of contingency and a wide space for value-laden discretionary judgment occurs at the interface between state and society; in other words that this is a routine feature of the operation of bureaucracies. But I don't mean to deny that there might be settings and types of interactions where the discretion is so constrained that you end up with a scripted encounter.

HP: You are a political scientist who focuses on moral ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions. As a cultural historian, I feel a strong affinity. Could you say something about your method?

BZ: If you're a political theorist, one way to approach encounters with frontline public officials is to ask the question: what should a street level bureaucrat do? You can then spell out a moral framework, something along the lines of considerations they should take into account. Your role as a theorist would be to articulate principles that guide the behavior of such actors. The caricature version is that you end up with some sort of equation weighing the various normative demands to which they must remain sensitive.

That's not quite what I do. I am more interested in the question of what it is like, and what it takes to be a moral agent in adverse circumstances, where you are subject to all sorts of pressures: resources are limited; you're understaffed; you're having very difficult, emotionally draining conversations with clients. In the context of welfare, where I did my fieldwork, the stakes are very high: claimants can literally be on the street depending on what you do. And there you are. You are expected to be respectful, fair, fast in doing your work, and responsive to people's individual situations. How could you possibly do all these things at once? Say you are responsive to someone and spend time with them. What about all the others who are waiting? And what about the targets you're supposed to meet because otherwise your agency's funding or contract may be suspended?

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The key question for me was: what does it take in such working conditions to remain attuned to a plural moral landscape filled with tensions and contradictions? Psychologists tell us that people often respond to situations like this, where you're in some sense structurally bound to fail, by simplifying the moral landscape, by focusing on one demand to the exclusion of others. How do you resist the temptation to reduce your field of vision?

HP: When you characterize the contingencies and dilemmas these bureaucrats and administrators face, I was reminded of professional caretakers in caretaking facilities or homes. They face some of the same quandaries you're describing. They are struggling with having to do much, often too much, and, as a result, having little time for all they have to do.

In your new project, you propose to revisit the history of social welfare in the twentieth century in the west through the lens of the spaces where people in need interacted with low-level bureaucrats and administrators. Comparatively, you study three societies and three such histories: the US, the UK, and Denmark. What are your findings?

BZ: In my first book, I looked at the people who are the face of the state. Now I am turning to the spaces. I'm focusing on one type of institution: public employment offices, places where the unemployed go to collect unemployment benefits and get help finding jobs. I am interested in thinking about how governments have used architecture to deal with a social ritual that, from the very beginning, has been widely seen as stigmatizing. People are typically ashamed, and made to feel ashamed, to visit public employment offices and welfare agencies more generally, and regularly describe their experience there as degrading. And so the question is: how have governments mobilized architecture (and not just policy) to try to redeem the occasion?

The three countries I study have approached this challenge in different ways and drawn on different design imaginaries for inspiration. I'm still working all of this out, but let me try to tentatively present the broad strokes. In the UK, there's been an attempt to reframe the encounter by couching it in the architectural idiom of retail. Public employment offices, or as they are called there, Job Centres, were redesigned to look like a supermarket for jobs in the 1970s and today look very much like the branch of a bank. So architecturally speaking, they've tried to reframe the trip to the employment office as a different kind of social occasion. In Denmark, an attempt has been made not so much to reframe the ritual but to humanize it by drawing on a design imaginary inspired by hospitality: we're going to make employment offices look more welcoming, importing design elements from the home but also from coffee shops. In the United States, the ritual has been neither reframed nor humanized but rather effaced. For a variety of reasons, the spaces have been made as inconspicuous and generic as possible so they don't stand out from any other interaction you would have with a professional service entity. Public employment offices are non-spaces. This is usually seen as a term of criticism, but in my conversations with managers of public employment offices in the US, I've come to realize that this impression is purposefully sought after: how could something be stigmatizing if it looks like everything else?

What I want to do is reconstruct and reflect upon these developments. This means both explaining why governments were led to these design imaginaries and interrogating them, showing why they can be treacherous propositions. On the one hand, they're attractive: who wouldn't want to refresh the look of public employment offices and welfare offices more generally? But on the other hand, these design imaginaries let in associations, modes of behavior, norms that can be ill-suited to the particularities of the relationship between citizens and the

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welfare state. I think the history of their adoption is filled with painful ironies that I try to chronicle and conceptualize.

But let me step back for a moment. Within the field of political science, it's surprising to me how little has been written about the physical premises of the welfare state. In general, political scientists haven't written all that much about architecture. When they have, it's been primarily about monumental spaces with a clear representational content (like city halls, courts, parliaments) or about how power functions in disciplinary institutions, in the vein of Michel Foucault. But the ordinary spaces in which we meet the state don't readily belong to either of these categories. They appear so generic and simple that there doesn't seem to be much to say about them. In a way, I suspect that little has been said about them because they don't seem to be pregnant with meaning. Part of what I'm trying to do is to show that these spaces actually warrant close attention.

When citizens describe their interactions with political institutions, they often use terms that are atmospheric and that convey something of the feel of the spaces. They speak of institutions and institutional spaces that are cool, distant, grim, stiff. How do we recapture that language and actually give it the significance it deserves? Governments have been well aware of the fact that people apprehend the state in this manner. This is why public employment offices, for instance, have been a terrain of experimentation in design. It's a story that hasn't yet been told and that I'm trying to piece together to ground more theoretical reflections on the agency of architecture, the affective nature of the state, and what it means to give form to democratic values.

HP: I'm writing about the antechamber in early modern Europe. To my knowledge, there is not one monograph about this type of space. There are, of course, surveys of architecture that discuss it in passing. Yet, as a rule, they mention antespaces only as the entry to a suite of rooms. In these texts, like a tourist, you quickly advance to other rooms, usually the most luxurious ones. Yet the room in which many people would have spent much time is often neglected when in fact it is representative in the double sense of the word: it's representative of a way of approaching social relations but also representative in cultural or visual terms as the space where an aristocrat, a ruler or, ultimately, the state presents itself to others.

I'm wondering who the designers of the spaces you are interested in are. Who comes up with layouts and interior designs? Some of the things you said remind me of a team of architects from the 1970s. Their manual, *A Pattern Language* (Alexander *et al*., 1977, esp. pp. 119-122), calls for waiting areas in offices that do not confine waiters to one room but permit them to roam. Who is behind these spaces?

BZ: The answer is that there isn't anything as systematic as Christopher Alexander, where every single space, its function, and its feeling gets articulated. It varies quite a bit. For the most part, these offices are designed by people who are as faceless as the bureaucrats who work in them. They're not made by famous architects. In that sense, it's a challenge to study them, because they don't leave traces where you would normally find architectural traces—in the archives of well-known firms, for instance, or in the writings of architectural critics.

There are exceptions of course. Walter Gropius designed an employment exchange in Dessau. And Paul Rudolph designed the State Service Center in Boston (see Abramson, 2020). But generally speaking, these places are either put together on an ad-hoc basis or designed by consultants who propose blueprints and concepts. In the UK for instance, the most recent

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environmental design guide for Job Centres was conceived by a firm that made its name redesigning the branches of the Royal Bank of Scotland. Who is hired as a concept architect, and what they are known for, can be revealing of the vision that government agencies have for the space. The bulk of the work is done, not on the exterior of the building, which usually is quite bland, but on the inside, where design guides spell out pretty much everything from the color of the carpet to the type of light bulb used and the nature of the fabrics. In the UK, the guide is then used as part of a coordinated rollout across the several hundred Job Centre locations.

In Denmark and in the United States, the landscape is much more fragmented because of who has the administrative authority to decide what these spaces look like. In Denmark, the decision is now left to the *kommunes*, which adopt different approaches, typically relying on the help of professional architects—which is not surprising, perhaps, given the attention that Danes in general give to design. In the United States, you get more of a do-it-yourself approach to design. In the absence of a centralized authority that issues a blueprint, anyone running an employment office comes up with their own theories of environmental behavior and how space matters. But their visions are generally constrained by a reluctance to pay for space, so they end up mostly re-arranging furniture they've inherited from various waves of procurement and trying to give it a certain spin. So the extent to which these spaces are designed from the ground up, and the extent to which they follow a single model, really depends on what country you're in and whether or not professional architects are hired.

HP (laughing): I hope your study will be read by 'starchitects' like Rem Koolhaas or Peter Zumthor. They might submit designs for some of these agencies…

BZ: I do, too. Wouldn't it be interesting to see what they come up with? But I am intrigued by your project on the antechamber. These are spaces where many figures in the canon of political theory—preceptors, advisors to princes—would have spent a lot of time. How were antechambers designed and what were they meant to convey? Was there much variation in how they looked or was there a recipe that everyone was following?

HP: Like the waiting zones of the welfare agencies you study, late medieval and early modern elites crafted many a message through their architectures of waiting. As the word reveals, these rooms 'before' (ante) another room were a space in relation to other spaces. In this sense, the antechamber usually functioned like a spatial threshold to a stately apartment on the same floor. As a rule, antespaces were smaller and less ornate than the room where an encounter with the person one had come to see would have taken place. In residences or courts where there existed more than one antechamber (as would have been common), the first one was less luxuriously furnished than the second, where visitors of higher standing would have spent time. Apart from this general rule—the closer one gets to the inner quarters of the great and mighty, the fancier the décor—there was no standard imagery or furniture for antespaces. They were meant to impress, if not intimidate, as well as inform, instruct, and in some cases even entertain—or a combination of these. At the same time, they often conferred oblique messages about those who commissioned such spaces: their lineage, their passions, their possessions etc. Such spaces, in other words, would have given political theorists *avant la lettre* much to think about, I am sure.

But let us return to your work on public agencies. What makes your project stand out is that you take on actual spaces. A political theorist like Carl Schmitt (1954) writes about the

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antechamber or the corridor. But when you read his discussion, the reader knows he's never looked at an actual space. Schmitt is not interested in the architecture. But you are.

I am wondering whether you can speak about the experience of those who wait or waited there. What do these spaces tell us? How do people inhabit them? I'm thinking here of *Beyond Caring* (1986), a series of photographs from Britain during the mid 1980s by Paul Graham. They were taken to capture the use of spaces: their neglect, their underfunded look, and the people moving through them. What can we learn from interior designs about the people who waited and wait for an appointment?

BZ: Since you mentioned the UK, let me tell you a bit about how the offices have evolved there and what we can learn from that. But first, a quick remark about *Beyond Caring*. Paul Graham's photographs are extraordinary and moving. At the same time, I think it's important to note that the photographic record, just as the journalistic record, can be somewhat biased. Public employment offices appear in the public eye only in times of crisis. Decades come and go, and the pictures remain the same: a long line of people, fluorescent lights, looks of hopelessness and despair. It's as if the visual representation of these spaces fits a certain formula, which sometimes, but not always, corresponds to their actuality. Public employment offices also exist when employment opportunities are plentiful.

Paul Graham's photographs also present one side of the story. They document offices where benefits were claimed. But at the same time as benefits offices looked quite bleak, there was a parallel network of Job Centres responsible for job placement, which were much nicer in places precisely to underscore a contrast with benefits offices. Over the course of the long twentieth century, these two functions, benefits and placement, go in and out of being in the same building. Governments sought to improve the image of job-seeking services by housing them in a separate building from benefits, often relegating benefits to the sort of bleak, closed, and claustrophobic places that Graham captures. The idea was that by doing this you'd kill two birds with one stone: you'd motivate the unemployed and employers to use the Job Centre by giving it a fresh image, and you discourage people from seeking benefits by making the experience (even more) unpleasant.

But let me get back to the evolution of public employment offices. If we look back to the first few decades of the twentieth century, these offices started out as big open spaces, essentially a large waiting room (Figure 1). Typically, the main architectural device then was a long counter that would separate clients from bureaucrats.

HP: … like waiting in the old type of banks …

BZ: Yes, exactly. There was a space for clerks and a space for clients. The organization of space was binary, and typically, the experience of waiting there was frontal. Everyone was looking in the same direction. You're looking at what's happening to the person at the counter; everyone is aware of how they are being treated by agents of the state. Whatever happens to them is common knowledge. The counter also served to keep officials all to one side. This created some anonymity and at times enabled clients to speak to each other with greater liberty. Employment offices could be quite loud, or at least they're described in novels as spaces where people waiting would have conversations. They talked to each other.

Over the course of the century, the counter slowly disappears and is replaced by desks that tend to be peppered throughout the space in a much more open office landscape, a

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Bürolandschaft. You have a seated conversation, a personalized one-on-one encounter with a 'work coach'. The waiting area is reduced in size and now consists primarily of small clusters of chairs, scattered throughout the office and oriented in different directions, so that the space no longer has a clear focal point (Figure 2). All sorts of efforts are made in parallel to reduce the amount of time people spend waiting. The internet has facilitated this. These days, you make an appointment online and arrive at the designated time so that in principle, you come into the space and go out as rapidly as possible.

As a result of these transformations, the experience of waiting for the state has been individuated; collective waiting and witnessing together has mostly disappeared. You can see this in a film like Ken Loach's I*, Daniel Blake* (2016), where most of the waiting time is spent by the protagonist in his apartment, waiting for the phone to ring. So waiting hasn't disappeared, but it's been individuated and delocalized. From an administrative standpoint, it's easy to present this as a success story: people are waiting less. At the same time, there might have been something important to the idea of waiting together, witnessing together, especially when people are going through a phase in their lives that is quite difficult. In the society in which we live, to lose your job is to lose not just your paycheck but often your self-esteem, self-respect, and your social network, too. To live this alone comes with its own kind of horror.

Figure 1. A queue of unemployed men in the Labour Exchange, August 1937. Photograph by Humphrey Spencer. Copyright Bolton City Council, UK. Image ref. 1993.83.03.13. Print ref. 2006.147.6. Available at: http://boltonworktown.co.uk/photograph/labour-exchange-2, last retrieved 16 August 2021.

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Figure 2. Customer waiting areas in Job Centre Plus, 2014. ‘Seating areas for customer awaiting booked interviews are dispersed throughout the open-plan office, along primary circulation routes. The objective is to group small clusters of single and double seat modules, with coffee tables and banners, to create ‘pockets’ of waiting space … where customers can wait in an informal and relaxed environment. These areas use soft seating and coffee tables’. Job Centre Plus Environment Guide, Department for Work and Pensions. Crown Copyright. Available at: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20140701132214/http://www.dwp.gov.uk/jpeg/design-and-space-planning/areas/op-waiting/, last retrieved 16 August 2021.

HP: In the mid 1960s, the social scientist Scott Briar (1966, p. 52) concluded that people who were waiting in public offices and similar bureaucracies in the United States over-reported their wait times. I’m wondering what the new setting you describe means for how people talk about waiting.

BZ: The short answer is that I don't know, but it would be very interesting to find out. It’s true that people tend to over-report how long they’ve waited. My suspicion is that the kind of space in which you’re waiting might have an effect on that. Architecture doesn’t change how long you wait but it changes the character of your wait. It depends in part on what you think you’re waiting for…

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HP: …or how frequently you go. If you go to the same space many times, even if this space is set up to lessen the woes of those who have to wait, you will be so familiar with it that after a while it likely won't have that same effect.

BZ: Yes, absolutely. But let me return the question. As you know, the sociologist Barry Schwartz observed that waiting tracks the distribution of power in a social system. But it strikes me that it's not just how long we wait but where we wait and in what conditions that says something about our standing—after all, both you and I have an interest in the spaces of waiting at least in part because these spaces color the experience of waiting. I wonder how the dimensions of time and space intersect with the question of power in your research on the antechamber.

HP: Let me first acknowledge the magnitude of the question you ask before sharing initial thoughts in response. From my point of view, political history has often neglected the role of temporal scripts in the production of power or authority. This is understandable. Quotidian rhythms are difficult to come by in written documents; writing systems often are given the function of storing information, not to reflect social processes within the expanse of time. By comparison, quite a number of studies in recent years have addressed the impact of space on social relations. Researchers who study social times in history still need to catch up. What motivates my research on antechambers is that this theme allows me to study space and time in synchrony—not as abstract dimensions of our existence but in the concrete circumstances of waiting in the antechamber.

Here is what I can say at this stage in response to your question. In a stratified society, wait times imposed on others helped establish the social status of those who had command over an antechamber. Such temporal protocols in particular rooms were a way to formalize social interactions in hierarchical societies. But they also endowed the powerful with the capacity to single out individuals with their favors and attention or ignore them. In the end, however, the intersection of spatial proximity and social distance that defined the antechamber was about narrowing access to lords and rulers in a society where personal interaction mattered profoundly.

Now let me ask you the following: waiting is an interesting activity (when it also can be an inactivity) because of the many emotions individuals experience while waiting. They are an integral part of what defines waiting. Emotions such as anxiety and hope, dread and the banality of what is all too familiar, being pressed for time at the same time as one is bored. I wonder how these mixed emotions figure in settings where administrators, designers, architects, and theorists of the welfare state interact. How to account for architectures of waiting as affective spaces?

BZ: It's fascinating what you're saying. I think it's absolutely true. Waiting is a very rich experience—to be convinced of that, you only need to watch Frederick Wiseman's *Welfare* (1975)—but an experience that often tends to be flattened in the scholarly literature in political science and public administration. Either researchers describe welfare offices as bleak and grim and then move on, or insofar as they talk about waiting at all, they often talk about the duration of it, as if that exhausted the phenomenon.

Recapturing how mixed the experience of waiting is strikes me as really important because it might give us pause when we start trying to reform administrative agencies. Right now, a lot of the waiting rooms I'm studying—the 'antechambers of the welfare state'—are

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disappearing. They are being replaced by online portals. The success story in that space, which has served as inspiration for many governments around the world, is GOV.UK. The UK has been a pioneer in digital government, and the team that designed this platform became quite well known as a result. It's very telling, I think, that one of the main design inspirations for GOV.UK was the UK's highway signage system, the work of the famous designer Margaret Calvert. Her main preoccupation was the following: you're driving at high speed, it's raining, and you can't see anything, and then in one flash or second you need to get all the information you need to find your way.

This makes a lot of sense when you're thinking about a highway signage system. But what happens when you start thinking like this about the interface between state and society? Can you reduce everything that happens in a waiting room to a flash of information? The worry is that if you start thinking in these terms, it rapidly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If it's all about information exchange, about rapid transaction, this is what you measure, what you track, what you ask people about. The richness of the experience and its many meanings are pushed to the side, without so much as an argument or explanation.

That's why it seems to me that retelling the history of the 'antechambers of the welfare state', although it may seem antiquated today, is actually very much of the present. Reflecting on what happened there, we get a better sense of what we can and should demand of an interface between state and society and how we should approach the transition to a different type of interface, which is what we seem to be going through now.

I am curious about whether something similar happened with antechambers. Did they fall out of fashion, or are they still with us in a different guise?

HP: I wish I had an answer to your question. In many ways, the memory of anterooms lives on. Importantly, the antechamber is still with us as a metaphor. Writers in a variety of languages have expressed an acute interest in anterooms as places of creative gestation or of an existential confrontation with the world. Even the stage in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* could be interpreted as an antespace of sorts. On a different note, architectural codes from before 1800 lived on in the buildings of nineteenth-century train stations. Like in eighteenth-century castles, the different waiting rooms for different classes of travelers with their different amenities were designed to reduce friction between the members of the upper crust and the less fortunate. Also, like in the period of the antechamber, these rooms functioned slightly differently in different European, Asian, or American railway networks (Kellermann, 2021). Waiting rooms at the dentist's or the doctor's are but a poor relation of the courtly antechamber or the classic *salles d'attente*. Yet like antespaces of old, they communicate and seek to relax, inform, or engage those who wait there. At the same time, architectures of waiting have also disappeared, as you say. The waiting room on the online platform Zoom is a virtual black screen. What is more, the rich and powerful of today live their lives walled off from others in ways that have made antechambers obsolete as a space where those who hope to better their lives or dream of improving their lot interact with those above their class.

This brings me to my final question about the future of waiting. You've already alluded to the fact that where people wait today is mostly at home for an online encounter or registration, whatever it may be. What goes missing in this transformation is the notion of the collective of those who wait at a particular moment (even if unrealized)—the knowledge that you're not by yourself. I'm wondering what this means for future interactions between the state and those who approach the state with some kind of need or request. What are your thoughts on this question?

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BZ: There is a wonderful passage in George Orwell, in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1958 [1937]), where he suggests that our aim as a society should not just be to get people to work but to enable them to go through the experience of being out of work 'without going spiritually to pieces'. And for that, it's really important to have a sense that others are going through the same experience too. It's not just me. But it's me and Alf Smith and Bert Jones and … Maybe you had this at a certain time as a byproduct of working-class culture and the closure of entire factories, but right now, unemployment often hits more sporadically. So the texture of social ties is a really important factor, and I think we need to pay more attention to that in thinking about new interfaces between state and society.

There's something interesting happening with the re-formation of communities online, though I don't know exactly how to approach it yet. Forms of waiting together aren't disappearing entirely but are re-forming on platforms like Reddit or Facebook—not on governmental websites. With the pandemic and the extension of unemployment benefits, several people, some of whom I had a chance to speak to, became online hosts for Reddit fora—private individuals doing this in their free time. They were acting both as a clearing house for information but also, I believe, to provide a sense of community to people who were completely lost and disoriented, many of whom were unemployed for the first time in their lives.

When we think about the move from waiting rooms to online platforms, it would be misleading to focus only on governmental websites and think of them as information portals. We're moving to something that involves a constellation of online spaces, a kind of archipelago. Now, what is it like to wait in these spaces, which involve a different kind of anonymity than traditional waiting rooms and usually rely on text-based interactions? I don't know, but this would be a very compelling research agenda: thinking about the experience of waiting together on these platforms, what people make of it, and how they experience it.

HP: I like the idea that there are support groups for those who wait. A novelty! Hopefully, someone will let waiters with a particular purpose know that there are communities for them on Reddit or Facebook.

What you say makes me think of what is well documented in social analysis for a variety of contexts: what we wait for commands value; what we don't wait for is less appreciated. The future of waiting has much to do with this conundrum. This is especially true at a moment when equitable access is a crucial political goal that mobilizes many voters and activists. Someone running for office in the 2020 U.S. presidential primary promoted the slogan 'No more waiting. We're done waiting'. Interestingly, it was not clear what one had waited for in the past. In principle, one could insert all kinds of issues. In this instance, waiting figured as a political problem. Yet for individuals as well as for collectives, waiting may also be crucial for appreciating what one gains at the end of the wait period.

BZ: Think about the various institutions that are part of government. The courts have their architectural staging; police stations can look quite imposing; the legislatures are in fancy parliaments; municipalities have city halls. Many branches of government give themselves a distinctive architectural presence. But that's not generally true of the institutions of the welfare state. Public employment offices, for instance, spent much of the past fifty years trying to disguise themselves as other types of institutions—a bank, a coffeeshop, a generic office. And yet this is where government is actually giving people assistance, something to which you might

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want to draw attention, something for which people might, in principle, be glad to wait. It's as if the state were withdrawing architecturally.

How does that affect the experience of waiting in one of 'the antechambers of the welfare state'? In the UK, you enter a public employment office, and it looks like a bank. Suppose the architecture is successful at evoking this image—is that a beneficial association for the welfare state? If you enter a Job Centre and think you're entering a bank, there's no way you're not going to be disappointed: no public institution can uphold the same standards of customer service as the private sector, for very good reasons. It can't price out certain segments of the market. It can't dispense with the people who take too much time. It has to get to the bottom of every case, because people are there to claim what is theirs by right. By evoking associations with banking, isn't the welfare state putting itself in the worst possible light?

I realize this may sound old-fashioned, but I think there is something to the idea that the welfare state should positively assert the values for which it stands and develop in the process its own architectural register. Of course, no one wants to go back to the waiting rooms of the early twentieth century or to those of Paul Graham, and for all the recent interest there is little appetite today to revisit the experiments in brutalist architecture. But if the welfare state stands for distinctive values, maybe it needs its own architecture to express them.

HP: The notion of the state is at stake, it would seem. What does this mean for citizens and others in need of service? This has been a true pleasure. Thank you so much for your time.

(Edited from a live transcript.)

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