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Waiting as a Social Experience and Strategies of Resistance in Algerian Public Spaces: A Socio-Anthropological Approach

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***Abstract*—This article uses a socio-anthropological approach to study waiting as a social experience in everyday life, focusing on its relationship with time, power and symbolic resistance in Algerian public spaces. It considers waiting to be a social practice that goes beyond the temporal dimension associated with delays in obtaining services, revealing patterns of power organisation and relations of entitlement and status within institutional contexts. The study adopted an ethnographic approach, drawing on participant observation and interviews with social actors in various public waiting areas. The analysis focuses on the everyday practices of those waiting and their relationships with the institution and other actors. It highlights the forms of adaptation, negotiation and symbolic resistance that emerge within waiting spaces.**

***Keywords*—Waiting, public spaces, time, power, symbolic resistance.**

INTRODUCTION

Waiting constitutes a social phenomenon that goes beyond being a temporal interval between two events to become a social practice that reveals patterns of power organization within society and the mechanisms through which it operates in everyday life. Despite its constant presence in human experience, waiting has remained one of the phenomena that has not received sufficient attention in sociological analysis, as it is often reduced to a consequence of administrative shortcomings or organizational dysfunction. However, this reduction obscures its nature as a social construct that is produced and reproduced within specific institutional contexts, where time is distributed unequally among social actors, reflecting disparities in access to resources, recognition, and social status.

In this context, waiting areas in Sidi Bel Abbès, such as those in post offices, emergency medical departments and social housing application offices, as well as transport stations, are ideal places to study the relationship between time and power. Waiting in these spaces is not experienced as idle time, but as an intense social experience during which individuals are subject to an external temporal rhythm. This transforms time into a social resource monopolised by the institution, through which relations of domination and hierarchy are reproduced. Consequently, waiting becomes an institutional practice that influences individuals' perceptions of themselves, as well as their

representations of citizenship, justice and entitlement.

This perspective aligns with the arguments presented by Johannes Fabian in his book Time and the Other. Fabian demonstrates that time is not a natural given or a neutral framework for events, but a social and political construct that organises relations among actors, determining who sets the temporal rhythm and who is subjected to it, compelled to wait (Fabian, 1983, p. 31). Michel Foucault builds on this by analysing techniques of power and arguing that discipline is not only exercised through control of space, but also through organisation of time and subjection of bodies to specific rhythms, making time an instrument of discipline and obedience (Foucault, 1975, p. 152).

However, waiting is not just a disciplinary technique; it also creates a space for reshaping social experience. Feelings of powerlessness, adaptation and symbolic resistance intersect within this space, while individuals' perceptions of themselves and their relationships with the institution are reconstructed. From this perspective, waiting can be viewed as a form of symbolic violence, exercised quietly and without direct coercion. The suspension of time reduces an individual's capacity to act and tests their social worth, particularly when they are in a position of vulnerability, such as an applicant or a person in need.

In the same context, Javier Auyero shows that waiting in bureaucratic institutions is not just a result of poor administration, but is actually one of the ways in which power is exercised. Through this mechanism, the state creates patterns of compliance and normalises delays, thereby reshaping citizens' relationships with public institutions (Auyero, 2012, p. 5).

For his part, Pierre Bourdieu emphasises that control over time, particularly the ability to make others wait, constitutes a form of symbolic power because monopolising time means monopolising social recognition and reinforcing relations of domination within social fields. Accordingly, waiting is not merely a temporal experience, but a social practice that contributes to the reproduction of social inequality through unequal control of time as a resource and symbolic capital. An individual waiting for a service is not only anticipating its provision, but also waiting for the institution to recognise their right to access it. Meanwhile, the institution possesses the power to regulate or postpone this recognition by controlling the temporal rhythm of the interaction (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 273). From this perspective, waiting becomes more than a mere delay in time; it is a social practice through which relations of domination are reproduced, and the recognition of an individual's social status and entitlement is delayed.

Building on this theoretical framework, this article critically examines waiting as a social phenomenon that extends beyond its temporal dimension, addressing the following research question:

In what ways is waiting reproduced within bureaucratic institutions as a social experience that shapes individuals' relationships with power, influencing their perceptions of social status and entitlement?

This study takes a socio-anthropological approach, considering waiting to be a social and cultural phenomenon. Rather than reducing it to its temporal or functional dimension, it is understood as an everyday practice in which systems of power, social representations, patterns of interaction and symbolic stakes intersect to frame individuals' relationships with institutions. From this perspective, waiting spaces are viewed not as places where time passes, but as social fields in which relations of domination and negotiation are embodied and where forms of compliance, resistance and meaning-making emerge (Meloudi, 2026, pp. 6–7).

In line with this approach, the study adopted the ethnographic method, as it is well suited to understanding everyday practices in their natural context. Fieldwork was based on participant observation, enabling the researcher to integrate into waiting spaces as a social actor and observe details of everyday life that are difficult to uncover through interviews or questionnaires alone. Fieldwork was conducted in different spaces over separate periods, enabling us to observe variations in waiting experiences according to differences in

social and temporal contexts. Data collection was not limited to participant observation; interviews were also conducted with social actors from diverse age and occupational groups to identify their perceptions of waiting, their interpretations of delays and their understanding of their relationships with public institutions. Combining observation and discourse enabled us to move beyond the distinction between what individuals say and what they actually do, in keeping with the socio-anthropological perspective that regards practice and discourse as complementary dimensions for understanding social reality.

Particular attention was also devoted to moments when tensions escalated in waiting areas, as these moments reveal the underlying social structures at play. They reveal patterns of negotiation, the rearrangement of positions, control mechanisms, and the limits of compliance and resistance. Rather than being interpreted as exceptional events, these moments are seen as expressions of the dynamics of everyday life, through which relationships between citizens and institutions are reshaped, revealing various forms of symbolic power and social discipline.

To this end, the study relied on field notes to document various forms of interaction, such as body language, modes of communication, patterns of spatial use and movement rhythms within waiting areas. The notes also recorded impressions and preliminary interpretations arising from daily engagement with the field. After data collection was complete, the field material underwent thematic analysis based on an interpretive approach, which aimed to identify common semantic units and relate them to the social and cultural contexts in which they were produced. The main variables that emerged were time, power, waiting, the body, recognition, discipline, adaptation strategies, solidarity and everyday resistance.

Four field sites were purposively selected for the study because they represent spaces in which the experience of waiting is particularly prevalent in urban society in Sidi Bel Abbès, despite differing in context, actors and patterns of interaction.

The first site: Post Offices: Waiting in these spaces is associated with access to financial resources and services. This reveals how technical and organisational procedures are transformed into mechanisms for managing citizens' social time.

The second site: Emergency Departments at the University Hospital: Here, administrative time intersects with biological and vital time, and waiting becomes part of the illness experience. This leads to various forms of negotiation with medical authority and the rearrangement of priorities according to the institution's logic.

The Third Site: Administrative Departments Responsible for Social Housing Applications: Waiting extends beyond its everyday dimension to become a prolonged experience that may last for years. This generates social representations of justice and fairness, while also shaping citizens' relationships with public administration.

The Fourth Site: Urban and suburban transport stations: These everyday spaces see the intersection of time, work and mobility. Waiting in these spaces not only reflects shortcomings in service organisation, but also reveals the forms of adaptation developed by social actors, as well as patterns of cooperation and competition and the reproduction of informal rules governing priority and the use of space. This makes them a socio-anthropological laboratory for understanding everyday practices related to the management of time within the city.

1. THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL LEVEL OF WAITING

1.1 The lived experience of waiting

Taking a socio-anthropological approach to waiting means moving beyond viewing it as merely a period of time between two events. Instead, it should be considered as a lived social experience in which temporal,

spatial and bodily dimensions intersect. This shapes individuals' relationships with institutions and power. Time is not experienced as a neutral, chronological given, but as a social construct produced through everyday practices and reorganised by institutions according to their own logic. In this context, Henri Lefebvre (2004, p. 09) argues that everyday life is shaped by social rhythms arising from the continuous interaction between time, space, and the body, and that every social space imposes a specific rhythm that organises movement, waiting, and interaction between individuals. From this perspective, waiting does not represent an interruption to everyday life, but rather constitutes one of the rhythms produced by institutions through which they reorganise individuals' social time.

Field observations conducted in waiting areas in Sidi Bel Abbès reveal that time is not experienced as a regular succession of minutes and hours, but as a state of uncertainty and suspension. Those waiting find themselves caught between the prospect of receiving the service and the possibility of further delays. Waiting does not mean the absence of time, but rather an intensified awareness of it, as each minute becomes a tangible experience marked by anticipation and a sense of being unable to control the course of events. One participant expressed this experience by stating: 'Time passes normally... but here, I feel every minute is an hour.' This statement reveals the transformation of time from objective time, as measured by a clock, to subjective time, as experienced through lived experience. In this context, the individual's internal rhythm becomes detached from the rhythm imposed by the institution. This finding aligns with Johannes Fabian's argument that time is a social construct through which power relations are exercised, as institutions determine who has the right to take the initiative and who is compelled to wait (Fabian, 1983, pp. 21–25).

This temporal experience is inseparable from the characteristics of the space in which it occurs. According to Henri Lefebvre's theory, space is not merely a physical framework that accommodates actions; it is also a product of social relations that contributes to their reproduction (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 26–31). Participant observation has shown that waiting room features such as limited space, poor-quality seating, prolonged standing and inadequate ventilation or lighting are not merely perceived as architectural characteristics by those waiting, but as elements that shape their everyday experience and influence their perception of their relationship with the institution. Space thus performs a social and symbolic function, contributing to the production of a sense of respect or marginalisation, and proximity to or distance from administrative authority.

These observations are consistent with Pierre Bourdieu's argument that control over time is one manifestation of symbolic power. The ability to make others wait is not merely a consequence of administrative organisational requirements, but an expression of the imbalance of power between those who possess the authority to organise time and those subject to its rhythm (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 270). This is evident in certain administrative departments, where citizens are compelled to wait for hours or stand in unsuitable conditions. The body itself becomes a site upon which the effects of the institution's symbolic domination are inscribed.

The ethnographic material also revealed the role of technical devices in reshaping the experience of waiting. In post offices, for example, the numbering system is intended to ensure respect for the principle of precedence. However, when the device malfunctions or the network is interrupted, the time taken for administrative tasks becomes unpredictable, and access to the service depends on the institution's ability to restore technical regularity. At this point, the impact of the malfunction is not just technical; it also redistributes positions of authority within the waiting area. Employees, by virtue of their institutional position, become the controllers of the rhythm of time, while those waiting find themselves in a state of temporal suspension whose limits are difficult to understand or control.

The dynamics of power extend beyond the relationship between employees and those waiting to include the various actors within the institution. Field observations have shown that some staff members responsible for regulating entry go beyond their administrative duties by controlling access to services, explaining procedures and sometimes informally rearranging priorities. Such practices can lead to different perceptions of procedural justice and equality of access to services, especially when queue-jumping or giving priority to certain individuals is seen as breaking the organisation's agreed rules.

These findings are consistent with Michel Foucault's analysis, in which he argues that power is not only exercised through direct surveillance, but also through the organisation of time and the subjection of bodies to specific rhythms that make discipline an everyday practice (Foucault, 1975, p. 152). Prolonged standing, sitting in uncomfortable positions and complying with queueing rules are not merely organisational arrangements, but institutional techniques that reshape individuals' relationships with time, space and power. Consequently, waiting becomes a social practice produced by the institution and reinterpreted and adapted by social actors, making time one of the fundamental resources through which power is exercised in everyday life.

1.2 The collective experience of waiting and the reproduction of meaning

The experience of waiting cannot be reduced to an individual's perception of time or the personal suffering caused by delays. Rather, it extends beyond this to become a social experience, constructed through daily interactions among people waiting in public spaces. Waiting spaces are not merely places where action is temporarily suspended; they are social contexts in which communication, the exchange of experiences and the construction of shared meanings about institutions and administrative procedures emerge. In this sense, individuals do not experience waiting in isolation, but rather as part of a temporary community formed through their shared experience (Loutsi, 2024, pp. 4–5).

Observation revealed that the area around the social housing department in Sidi Bel Abbès serves not only an administrative function, but also as a space for social interaction. Those waiting exchange information about procedures, application file numbers, committee meeting dates and legal amendments, as well as sharing their personal experiences of dealing with the administration. These repeated interactions produce collective knowledge that goes beyond official information, familiarising those waiting with the progress of their applications, the institution's operating mechanisms, and the unwritten rules governing their relationship with it.

One participant described the length of this experience, stating: 'I submitted my application file before I got married, and now I have three children. I renew the file and add the necessary documents every time, but so far, nothing has happened." This statement reveals that administrative time is measured not in abstract years, but through pivotal events in an individual's family life. Thus, waiting becomes part of an individual's social biography and personal memory becomes a means of measuring institutional time. This finding aligns with Javier Auyero's argument that prolonged waiting not only produces compliance, but also enables citizens to accumulate practical knowledge about institutions through their daily encounters with their formal and informal rules (Auyero, 2012, p. 112).

Field data also showed that sarcasm is one of the symbolic resources used by people waiting to reinterpret their experience and mitigate its effects. Sarcastic comments about technical malfunctions, delays in announcing lists or slow procedures are not merely humorous expressions, but a social practice that reduces tension, strengthens the sense of sharing a collective experience and reconstructs meaning in the face of the uncertainty imposed by waiting.

Conversely, field data revealed that institutional time is not entirely subject to formal organisational rules, but rather is reorganised through social arrangements devised by the individuals waiting. Despite the use of

a digital ticketing system to regulate service priority, consensual practices emerge in post offices, such as keeping someone's place in the queue when they have had to leave temporarily or exchanging tickets on the basis of unwritten agreements. This enables the number to transcend its technical function and become a social resource, governed by trust and mutual cooperation.

These practices cannot be understood independently of the cultural context that gives them their social meaning. Interviews revealed that those waiting rely on commonly circulated popular expressions to justify these practices. Examples include "People are there for one another" and "The worldly life is fleeting, while the Hereafter endures". These expressions reflect the social perception that social relationships are important for managing everyday affairs, while also acknowledging that complete justice is not always achieved in social reality. Consequently, these arrangements are not perceived as departures from the system, but rather as social mechanisms for adapting to the institutional rhythm. This allows social actors to introduce a degree of flexibility into the experience of waiting, making it more bearable.

1.3 The social meaning of waiting: Patience and hope as resources for managing suspended time

The experience of waiting cannot be reduced to an emotional response to delay or a psychological state characterised by anxiety and frustration. From a socio-anthropological perspective, it is a lived social experience to which social actors assign meanings, values and symbols that make it understandable and bearable. Rather than being experienced as a temporal void, waiting is experienced as a social situation in which individual experience intertwines with cultural and moral frameworks that individuals draw upon to interpret suspended time and reorganise their relationship with it. Consequently, this analysis does not focus on the emotions that accompany waiting, but rather on how the meaning of this experience is reproduced in everyday life.

Field observations have shown that everyday language is one of the most important symbolic resources used by people waiting to make sense of their experience. Expressions commonly used in waiting spaces, such as 'Be patient' or 'Your turn will come soon, and you will be served', serve not only a communicative function, but also constitute cultural mechanisms for reframing suspended time. The phrase 'Be patient' is not perceived as an instruction to be passive or resigned, but rather as an appeal to a moral value that imbues the act of enduring waiting with social significance, making the capacity to endure imposed time a measure of virtue and self-control. The expression 'Your turn will come soon, and you will be served' represents a discourse that reconnects the uncertain present with an anticipated improvement in the future. This allows hope to persist despite the absence of any objective guarantee that waiting will soon end.

These everyday conversations reveal that institutional time is not only managed through administrative procedures, but also reorganised through the meanings produced by individuals during their daily interactions. In this context, language not only describes reality, but also shapes it by providing those who are waiting with symbolic frameworks that help them to understand and cope with the uncertainty inherent in waiting. This finding aligns with Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropological approach, in which culture is described as a web of meanings created by individuals to interpret their social world. According to this approach, the researcher's role is not only to describe actions, but also to interpret their meanings through 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973, pp. 6–9). From this perspective, the expressions exchanged among those waiting become cultural symbols that reproduce the meaning of waiting, making suspended time more understandable and bearable within the local cultural framework.

The ethnographic material confirms that hope constitutes a social resource upon which the everyday experience of those waiting relies, and is not merely an emotional state. Rather than being based on certainty, it is based on the continuation of expectation and the preservation of the possibility that relief may occur in an open future. This aligns with Vincent Crapanzano's analysis, which views waiting as an

existential experience where individuals live according to the rhythm of an imagined future that remains present as a deferred promise, with no guarantee of fulfilment (Crapanzano, 1985, p. 45).

However, field observations suggest that this hope does not eliminate the burden of time, but rather enables individuals to adapt to it and maintain their equilibrium in situations characterised by uncertainty. Thus, in everyday life, waiting becomes a social experience through which meaning is reproduced, relationships with the future are reshaped, and cultural and moral resources are mobilised to enable continued waiting despite its prolonged duration.

2. WAITING AS A FIELD FOR THE PRODUCTION OF POWER AND STRATEGIES OF SYMBOLIC RESISTANCE

While the phenomenological level reveals how waiting is experienced socially through time, the body, space and meaning, moving to the sociological level requires an examination of the social structure that produces and reorganises this experience. Waiting is not merely a consequence of organisational dysfunction or administrative slowness; rather, it constitutes a social practice in which power relations intersect with forms of everyday agency. While institutions organise time and distribute access to resources, social actors develop practices and tactics within these constraints to adapt to, negotiate with, or mitigate the effects of the existing system. Consequently, waiting becomes a space in which power is manifested as a social relationship, while also giving rise to forms of everyday resistance that do not necessarily seek to undermine the system, but rather reinterpret and deal with it in ways that alleviate the burden of the constraints it imposes.

2.1 Biological Time in the Face of Administrative Time

Field data collected in the emergency departments of the university hospital in Sidi Bel Abbès reveal a clear conflict between two different temporal logics. Biological time, imposed by pain and deteriorating health conditions, is measured by the intensity of suffering and the urgency of medical intervention. On the other hand, there is administrative time, which is governed by organisational procedures, the sequence of files and movement between different departments. At the intersection of these two temporal logics, delay is perceived not merely as slowness in service delivery, but as a disruption to the relationship between urgent need and institutional rhythm, which operates according to a different logic to that of the body and suffering.

Field data has shown that the emergency department is one of the most intense waiting spaces in sensory terms. Sounds such as those made by patients, the movement of stretchers, calls from medical staff and the smell of disinfectants all keep those waiting in a constant state of alertness. Time is therefore measured not by the number of minutes, but by the rhythm of pain and the possibility of health conditions deteriorating. Moments of tension also intensify when those waiting perceive the administrative rhythm to be disconnected from the biological rhythm. For example, the departure of a medical staff member to make a telephone call or take a short break was often interpreted as an expression of the mismatch between patients' urgent needs and the institution's slowness. This gave rise to verbal protests and comments reflecting the feeling that administrative time does not respond to the urgency of biological time.

This finding aligns with Henri Lefebvre's analysis of social rhythms. According to Lefebvre (2004, pp. 9–14), everyday life is based on the interaction of multiple rhythms that may be harmonious or disrupted when one rhythm imposes its logic on another. This disruption is clearly manifested in the emergency department, where the body's rhythm, requiring an urgent response, collides with the institutional rhythm, subject to organisational and procedural logic. This makes the experience of waiting more intense and painful.

The effects of this conflict extend beyond the perception of time to include how individuals perceive their status within the healthcare institution. Field observations revealed that some patients or their companions are forced to lie down in corridors or sit for hours in cramped spaces. Combined with limited communication about the reasons for delays, these conditions create the feeling that their suffering is not being recognised enough. Physical space, the organisation of waiting and institutional communication do not merely serve organisational functions; they also carry symbolic meanings that influence individuals' sense of their social worth.

This finding is consistent with Axel Honneth's theory of social recognition. According to this theory, recognition is an essential condition for preserving an individual's dignity and positive relationship with themselves. It also argues that experiences of neglect or indifference within institutions may produce a sense of diminished social status, even in the absence of any direct physical violence (Honneth, 1995, pp. 92–131). From this perspective, dissatisfaction among those waiting is not solely related to the length of the waiting period, but also to how their relationship with the institution is managed during that period.

In the face of the conflict between biological and administrative time, the ethnographic material revealed that those waiting do not confront the burden of waiting in silence; rather, they use symbolic resources derived from religious references to reinterpret and adapt to the experience. Examples of such expressions include "Healing comes from God", "Everything is written by my Lord", and "We do our best, and the rest is up to my Lord". These are not merely abstract expressions of faith, but serve a social function by helping individuals to adapt to the experience of waiting. They serve a social function by reorganising the relationship with time and reducing the uncertainty imposed by waiting. Stories about unexpected recoveries or previous experiences that ended well are also frequently shared, helping to create a shared sense of hope and transforming the waiting area into a place of symbolic solidarity and emotional support. Therefore, recourse to religious discourse should not be viewed as an escape from reality, but rather as a cultural resource that enables individuals to adapt to situations beyond their control.

2.2 The security guard and the employee: The Symbolic Power of Information and the Reproduction of Social Hierarchies

Field observations reveal that waiting is not only organised through official laws and procedures, but also by individuals in intermediary roles within the institution. The security guard and the employee responsible for receiving citizens or organising access are the most important of these individuals. Although their legal powers appear limited, they possess an extremely important resource: exclusive control over information concerning the progress of procedures, the order of turns and access to the service. Consequently, power is not exercised here through direct coercion, but rather through control over the flow of information and the timing of its disclosure. This makes knowledge a symbolic resource for the production of power within waiting spaces.

Field observations have shown that security guards, particularly in emergency medical departments, perform not only the function of regulating entry, but also the role of intermediary between external and medical care spaces. In many cases, the security guard decides who can approach the examination room door and who must wait or step back, based on their assessment of the situation or the instructions they receive. This intermediary position causes those waiting to view the security guard as the person most capable of influencing the waiting process. Consequently, questions, attempts at persuasion and sometimes verbal protests are directed at them in the hope of changing the entry order or obtaining reassuring information about relatives. When security guards limit their responses to guarded expressions conveying the need for patience or the uncertainty of the situation, they are not merely providing organisational information. Rather, they are reorganising the social time of those waiting and determining the limits of

what they can know at that particular moment.

The situation is not significantly different in administrative spaces, where the receptionist or file manager occupies a similar position. Information concerning the progress of an application, the processing date or the reason for a delay is scarce and not made available to everyone waiting. Even when determining whether to wait or not, the information provided by the employee is decisive. Their words do not merely convey information; they reshape the everyday time of those waiting, as they may signify continued waiting, its end, or the need to return at another time. Thus, information becomes a form of power because it controls individuals' expectations and influences how they organise their time.

This finding aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic power, which shows that power is not only exercised through explicit orders or coercive means, but also through control over symbolic resources that seem natural or self-evident, but which actually conceal unequal power relations (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 273). From this perspective, the monopolisation of information in waiting areas is not merely an organisational necessity, but also a means of reproducing social hierarchies. Opportunities to access knowledge vary according to previous experience, one's relationship with the security guard or employee, and the ability to negotiate and establish personal relationships.

The distribution of information is not always based on procedural criteria, but may also be influenced by informal factors such as familiarity, manner of communication or maʿrifa (personal connections) and wāsṭa (intermediation). This leads to subtle inequalities emerging within the queue: some individuals waiting possess prior knowledge of procedural processes or receive responses more quickly than others, while others remain trapped in uncertainty and prolonged waiting. Thus, inequality is not only associated with one's position in the queue, but also manifests as unequal access to information. This disparity creates hidden forms of hierarchy in a space that is, in principle, supposed to be based on equality among service users.

However, the socio-anthropological approach requires us to move beyond the stereotypical image that reduces security guards and employees to sources of authority or the sole people responsible for the suffering of those waiting. Interviews have shown that these individuals are subject to organisational pressures, an intense work pace and institutional instructions that restrict their ability to act. They therefore occupy an intermediary position within the bureaucratic structure, exercising limited authority over those waiting while simultaneously being subject to a higher authority that determines their working rules and the limits of their decision-making power. Consequently, the authority they exercise reflects the logic of the institution itself more than their individual characteristics, as the institution redistributes power across its various positions, making control over time and information one of its fundamental mechanisms for organising relationships within waiting spaces.

2.3 Sarcasm as a Mechanism of Symbolic Resistance and Reclaiming Time

Although waiting spaces produce various forms of subjugation and control, social actors do not remain passive. Instead, within the confines of the reality imposed on them, they develop everyday practices that allow them to adapt to the burden of waiting and redefine their relationship with authority. Rather than taking the form of direct confrontation with the institution, these practices are embodied in subtle symbolic strategies that reconstruct meaning and alleviate the burden of suspended time. Among these strategies, sarcasm is a notable cultural resource for reclaiming time and reshaping the experience of waiting.

Field observations have revealed that sarcastic comments are a regular feature of everyday interactions in queues, where such remarks are repeatedly exchanged. These remarks should not be dismissed as mere passing jokes, but rather as a form of social discourse that reinterprets waiting time and gives it meaning. While sarcasm does not eliminate waiting, it alleviates its burden by shifting frustration from the individual

to the collective level, where laughter becomes an act of solidarity that reduces feelings of helplessness and rebuilds temporary bonds among those waiting.

This finding aligns with James C. Scott's analysis, which suggests that individuals experiencing domination do not necessarily confront authority through public protest. Instead, they develop covert forms of everyday resistance, such as sarcasm, insinuation and passing comments. These practices enable them to maintain a degree of symbolic autonomy without directly confronting authority (Scott, 1985, pp. 29–35). From this perspective, sarcasm does not constitute a departure from the established order. Rather, it represents a means of restoring symbolic balance within an unequal relationship by enabling those waiting to express their rejection without threatening the continuity of their interaction with the institution.

We also observed that those waiting do not merely reinterpret time through language, but also employ techniques from everyday life to reorganise their relationship with waiting. One of the most important of these means is the mobile phone, as it allows individuals to temporarily escape the physical space of the queue by browsing social media, making phone calls, or following the news. This alleviates the feeling of time weighing heavily upon them and gives them a degree of control over the rhythm of waiting. In this sense, the mobile phone becomes a tool for reallocating imposed time, transforming it from wasted time into time that can be used for other activities.

The role of the mobile phone is not just to reorganise time; it also serves a symbolic function in renegotiating relations with authority. Field observations have shown that some people waiting in queues resort to taking photos of them, documenting malfunctions or recording situations they consider to be unjust. This makes the mobile phone a means of producing social testimony and introducing transparency into bureaucratic practices. This finding aligns with Michel de Certeau's argument that individuals devise everyday tactics to reuse spaces and rules in ways that serve their own needs, even when subject to strict institutional arrangements (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 29–42). Therefore, neither sarcasm nor the use of mobile phones should be considered marginal practices, but rather symbolic and technological resources that empower individuals to reclaim some of the time imposed by the institution and renegotiate their relationship with authority within the confines of everyday life without necessarily undermining the existing order.

2.4 Waiting as a Religious Practice

Alongside sarcasm, the ethnographic material revealed that religious discourse is one of the most important symbolic resources that social actors rely on to reinterpret the experience of waiting and adapt to its burden. Rather than being experienced as wasted time or merely an administrative delay, waiting is reintegrated into a religious framework that gives it moral significance, transforming suspended time from an everyday burden into an experience that can be endured through the concepts of patience, seeking divine reward and recompense. Expressions such as 'The reward is proportional to the hardship' and 'Make use of the time to engage in remembrance of God and seek forgiveness' were repeatedly heard in waiting spaces. These expressions serve not only an exhortative function, but also constitute a cultural framework that reorganises the relationship with time and alleviates the sense of uncertainty.

From a socio-anthropological perspective, this religious discourse should not be viewed as an abstract spiritual practice, but as a symbolic system providing individuals with tools to interpret their experiences and give meaning to their daily lives. This aligns with Clifford Geertz's argument that religion is a system of symbols which constructs conceptions of reality, providing individuals with a framework that makes the world more comprehensible and bearable (Geertz, 1973, p. 90). This analysis is also consistent with Mohammed Arkoun's discussion of the role of the religious imaginary in shaping individuals' perceptions of the social world. Religion is not merely a system of beliefs, but a symbolic and cultural system that

guides everyday representations and practices (Arkoun, 1999, p. 261). In light of these two perspectives, seeking divine reward becomes an interpretive framework through which those waiting can give meaning to and make sense of their experience of waiting.

However, this religious interpretation simultaneously serves two social functions. On the one hand, it provides those waiting with a symbolic resource to help them cope with situations beyond their control. On the other hand, it may indirectly reduce the tendency to protest by reinterpreting suffering as a trial requiring patience in order to receive a divine reward. This does not mean reducing religiosity to a means of producing compliance, though, since field research showed that religious discourse can also become an interactive tool used by those waiting when dealing with employees or security guards. They demonstrate patience and use language characterised by supplication and calmness, which is sometimes considered a more effective way of evoking sympathy and facilitating communication within bureaucratic spaces. Therefore, the religious interpretation of waiting does not appear to be synonymous with submission or the opposite of resistance, but rather a complex cultural practice that enables social actors to adapt to suspended time, while also allowing them to negotiate with authority through symbolic resources whose legitimacy derives from the prevailing religious culture.

3. THE SOCIAL SPACES OF WAITING: FROM PLACE TO SPACE

3.1 From the pavement to the service window: The Formation of Waiting Spaces in Post Offices

Field observations conducted in post offices in the city of Sidi Bel Abbès reveal that waiting does not begin at the institution’s entrance, but rather from the moment individuals join the queue that extends outside the building. The boundaries between public and institutional spaces often appear permeable as the queue extends onto the pavement, reorganises pedestrian movement and transforms part of the street into a functional space connected to the institution. Consequently, waiting is no longer confined to the administrative institution, but becomes a spatial phenomenon that reshapes the urban environment and imposes the institution’s rhythm on public space.

Thus, it seems that the architectural organisation of the space also contributes to the experience of waiting. Despite the spaciousness of the hall and the height of its ceiling, the concentration of people waiting in front of a limited number of service windows creates a high body density, forcing individuals into close proximity and restricting their ability to maintain personal space. The issue here is not merely physical narrowness, but also the distribution of space within the institution. Thus, architectural spaciousness coexists with functional congestion, producing a sense of spatial alienation in which individuals feel confined within a space that does not accommodate their need for movement or their everyday rhythms.

The observations also show that the digital ticketing system is an institutional attempt to organise time and neutralise direct competition among service users, since it assigns each individual a number that determines their position in the queue. However, the system is dependent on the stability of the technical infrastructure. As soon as the information system breaks down or the network is interrupted — situations that recur in the field — the number loses its organisational function and the queue reverts to more flexible and less controllable forms. In these forms, priority is renegotiated through the collective memory of those waiting, protests or attempts to establish one’s entitlement to a turn. This demonstrates that technical organisation does not eliminate social interaction, but rather reshapes it under new conditions. It also shows that the regulatory power of technology depends on its ability to function continuously.

One participant described the experience as follows: ‘We are packed on top of each other and there is no way to get through, ask questions or understand anything.’ This statement is significant not only for its descriptive nature, but also for the social meanings it conveys. The phrase ‘one on top of another’ reflects

the loss of bodily privacy and the transformation of those waiting into a densely packed human mass. Meanwhile, the phrase ‘there is no way to get through, ask questions, or understand anything’ is less concerned with physical distance and more with the symbolic distance between service users and decision makers. Despite its physical proximity, the service window symbolises the boundary between the waiting and service spaces, and between making and responding to a request. Access to it therefore depends not on physical distance, but on the ability to navigate an organisational system that controls time and access to the service.

These findings are consistent with Henri Lefebvre’s conception of social space, according to which space is not a neutral framework within which social life takes place, but rather a product of social relations that simultaneously contributes to their reproduction (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26). From this perspective, the post office is not merely a place where an administrative service is provided; it is also a space in which the relationship between the institution and its users is continually reshaped, and patterns of control, waiting and interaction are formed. This makes space itself an active agent in producing the social experience of waiting.

3.2 The body and the reshaping of space

Field observations within the administrative departments responsible for housing applications reveal that waiting spaces are organised through both administrative procedures and the material elements that shape the reception environment. The limited number of chairs, their worn condition and inadequate seating do not merely represent deficiencies in the furnishing of the space; they also affect how those waiting organise their bodies and their relationship with the place. Thus, furniture becomes an active element in producing the waiting experience, as it determines the possibilities for movement, sitting and remaining in place within the administrative space.

Field data reveal the widespread practice of sitting or lying on the ground. Those waiting resort to sitting on the floor, leaning against walls or occupying the pavements adjacent to the building while awaiting their summons. From a socio-anthropological perspective, these practices should not merely be understood as temporary solutions to a lack of chairs; rather, they are expressions of the body’s adaptation to administrative time, which extends beyond one’s ordinary capacity to stand or remain in a constant state of readiness. The transition from standing to sitting or lying on the ground signifies a change from brief, temporary waiting to prolonged waiting that has become part of the daily routine, as individuals adapt the space to enable them to stay there temporarily.

The ethnographic material reveals that this adaptation involves more than just changing bodily posture; it also involves reconfiguring the space itself. Pavements and passageways become places for eating, having conversations, reviewing documents and sharing information about housing applications. This transforms the administrative space, extending beyond its architectural boundaries, into a temporary social space where networks of interaction, solidarity and experience-sharing are established among those waiting.

This finding is consistent with Henri Lefebvre’s conception that space is not a fixed, material entity, but is continuously produced through the social practices of those who inhabit it (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 194–199). From this perspective, sitting or lying on the ground does not merely reflect a lack of facilities, but reveals how those waiting adapt the space to suit the conditions imposed by the institution.

In this field, waiting is not limited to hours or days; in many cases, it extends over many years, causing administrative time to overlap with individuals’ biographical time. Thus, bodily practices such as sitting or lying on the ground, as revealed by the field material, constitute more than merely physical postures imposed by the conditions of the place. They are social practices that reflect the adaptation of bodies to the institution’s temporal rhythm, while simultaneously revealing the capacity of social actors to reshape space

in ways that enable them to endure waiting periods that sometimes extend over several years.

3.3 Transport stations and the reshaping of everyday time

Field observations at urban transport stations in Sidi Bel Abbès reveal that waiting is not merely a stage preceding travel; it is also a social experience that reshapes individuals' everyday time and their relationships with their professional, educational and family commitments. In this space, time does not follow a fixed rhythm or timetable. Rather, it is characterised by uncertainty as buses and taxis arrive unpredictably. Consequently, those waiting must continually reorganise their day according to a rhythm over which they have no control.

Observation shows that those waiting remain in a constant state of alertness, directing their gaze towards the road and moving collectively whenever they believe a vehicle will stop. They then return to their positions if the vehicle continues on its way. This behaviour reflects not only anticipation of a means of transport, but also a body in a state of constant readiness, oscillating between hope of arrival and fear of further delay.

However, the most significant impact of waiting at transport stations is the way it extends beyond the station itself. Delayed transport not only prolongs waiting time, but also disrupts work schedules, causes students to arrive late for classes and postpones daily commitments. This puts those waiting under double pressure: not only do they have to wait for transport, but they also realise that time is slipping away from the rest of their day. Therefore, the effects of waiting are not confined to the station or transport space, but extend into other areas where they can lead to professional accountability, absence from classes or failure to fulfil social commitments.

From a socio-anthropological perspective, this experience cannot be understood as merely the result of a malfunction in the transport system, but as an expression of disruption to the coordination of social rhythms within the city. Transport time, working time and study time are interconnected rhythms; when one is disrupted, the others are affected in turn. This analysis aligns with Henri Lefebvre's discussion of social rhythms. He argues that everyday life is based on the interaction of multiple temporal systems and that disrupting one of these systems disturbs the lived experience as a whole (Lefebvre, 2004, pp. 8–14).

4. DECONSTRUCTING POWER AND SYMBOLS IN WAITING SPACES

Ethnographic data reveals that power in waiting spaces is not only exercised through administrative texts and procedures, but also through seemingly neutral material and symbolic elements. The glass service window (le guichet) in post offices and administrative offices serves not only to organise the relationship between employees and service users, but also to represent a symbolic boundary between the spaces of decision-making and service provision. It positions employees to control the course of interactions, while service users are compelled to approach the narrow opening, bend their bodies and lower their voices to be heard. From a socio-anthropological perspective, these movements are not incidental details, but constitute a daily ritual through which hierarchy is reproduced within the bureaucratic space. Administrative relations are translated into bodily postures that reflect differences in position and power.

Participant observation has shown that the glass serves not only protective and transparent functions, but also acts as a symbolic intermediary that reproduces the social distance between the two parties. While the service user can see the employee, they cannot enter the employee's space. The employee can therefore manage the interaction at their own pace, whether that be through silence, continuing to arrange documents, or postponing a response without providing an explanation. In this sense, the physical barrier becomes an instrument for producing symbolic power, whereby recognition of the service user is deferred and made subject to the institution's rhythm. This concept aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic power,

which is exercised through seemingly ordinary and natural practices that conceal unequal power relations beneath the surface (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 269–270).

This symbolic power takes a different form within emergency departments, where the security guard emerges as an intermediary who controls access to the treatment space. Although the guard possesses neither medical authority nor decision-making power regarding treatment, their exclusive control over entry grants them an effective capacity to rearrange the priorities of those waiting. Field research has shown that many service users resort to various strategies to win the guard's favour, such as expressing ingratiation, emphasising the severity of their condition, drawing on personal connections or adopting a religious stance. Thus, access to the doctor is determined not only by the official order of arrival, but also by individuals' ability to mobilise their symbolic resources and negotiate with the intermediary.

From this perspective, the security guard is not just carrying out an organisational function; they are also a social actor who redistributes access to services, meaning that power becomes embodied in the intermediary rather than in administrative regulations. This aligns with Michel Crozier's analysis of organisations, in which he demonstrates that power often arises from control over zones of uncertainty. In this model, an actor gains influence by monopolising information or a resource to which others have no access (Crozier, 1964, p. 145). The security guard monopolises knowledge of admission times, the order in which cases are handled and the possibility of exceptions. These factors establish the guard as a focal point for negotiation and the reproduction of hierarchy in a space that is ostensibly governed by the principle of equality.

Accordingly, field data reveal that power in waiting spaces is not solely based on official decisions, but is also constructed through physical barriers, intermediaries and everyday practices that reproduce inequalities in access to services. The glass service window, the security guard and even the fragile waiting room chairs are not marginal elements in the organisation of waiting; rather, they constitute symbolic mechanisms through which the institution asserts its presence and authority in everyday life.

5. STUDY FINDINGS

This study reveals that, in Algerian society, waiting cannot be understood merely as the time between making a request and receiving a service. Rather, it is a social and cultural construct in which power, space, time and the everyday practices of social actors intersect. As the ethnographic material shows, waiting is not so much wasted time as a space for reproducing social relations. Within this space, social status is tested and symbolic resources such as recognition, information and access to services are redistributed. In this sense, the study's findings confirm that time is not a neutral framework for social action, but rather a source of power. This is consistent with the arguments of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Henri Lefebvre, who have emphasised that control over time is one of the invisible ways in which domination is exercised.

The findings also demonstrate that the experience of waiting varies across different institutional contexts, taking on different social meanings depending on the nature and function of the institution. In emergency medical departments, for example, waiting becomes an existential experience intersecting with pain and the fear of losing one's life. In post offices, by contrast, waiting is governed by the relationship between technical systems and everyday practices. Failure of digital networks leads to traditional organisational structures being reproduced. In administrative departments, waiting takes on a cumulative character extending over years and becoming part of individuals' life histories, associated with their hopes of obtaining housing and achieving social stability. At transport stations, waiting takes the form of everyday uncertainty that reshapes working and study time, affecting the regularity of urban life.

The findings also reveal that power in waiting areas is not only exercised through laws and official procedures, but also produced through the details of everyday life. This includes features such as glass

service windows, physical barriers, monopolisation of information and the role of intermediaries, such as security guards or staff responsible for regulating entry. These findings are consistent with Pierre Bourdieu's conception of symbolic power and align with Michel Crozier's analysis, which shows that having control over areas of uncertainty can give people more influence than their formal authority would suggest. Accordingly, power within waiting spaces appears to be distributed among different actors rather than being monopolised by the institution alone.

Conversely, the field data does not portray those waiting as passive subjects entirely subject to the institution's logic. Instead, they demonstrate their ability to engage in various forms of negotiation and symbolic resistance. The study has shown that sarcasm, information exchange, keeping track of turns, religious resignation and seeking divine reward, and using mobile phones are social resources through which individuals reclaim control over time and alleviate the burden of waiting, rather than merely spontaneous practices. This is consistent with socio-anthropological perspectives which maintain that social actors continually reproduce or negotiate with structures through everyday practices, rather than merely submitting to them.

Another important finding of the study is that waiting gives rise to an informal economy of time, involving the exchange of turns, holding of places, circulation of information and rearrangement of priorities, according to social and cultural criteria that extend beyond official administrative organisation. This shows that institutional time is not just an abstract concept, but a social resource that is renegotiated within the queue. This allows people to introduce a human dimension to an organisational system that is dominated by bureaucracy.

The study also shows that space is not merely a neutral framework within which the experience of waiting takes place, but an active element in its creation. Field observations have shown that the organisation of space, the distribution of seating, and the spaciousness or narrowness of halls, glass barriers, pavements and passageways all contribute to shaping the experience of those waiting. This confirms Henri Lefebvre's thesis concerning the production of social space, highlighting that the everyday experience of waiting is constructed through continuous interaction between body, space and time.

Overall, these findings challenge the perception of waiting as a marginal phenomenon or an administrative malfunction. Instead, waiting emerges as an informal social institution in which relations between the state and citizens are reshaped, institutional legitimacy is tested, and subtle forms of power, resistance and negotiation are manifested. Therefore, studying waiting from a socio-anthropological perspective contributes to our understanding of the organisation of time within institutions and reveals how everyday life produces power relations. It also shows how social actors reconstruct their strategies to preserve recognition, entitlement and dignity within waiting spaces.

CONCLUSION:

This study concludes that waiting in Algerian society cannot be viewed as simply wasted time or a failure of institutions. Rather, it is a social experience in which the relationships between time, power and recognition intersect in public spaces. The experience of waiting varies depending on the social context in which it occurs and is influenced by individuals' relationships with institutions and others, as well as the everyday practices that imbue it with meanings and significance that extend beyond its temporal duration.

From this perspective, waiting constitutes a field in which the relationship between the individual and the institution is redefined. It also enables social actors to develop forms of adaptation, negotiation and symbolic resistance, making suspended time an experience open to reinterpretation and accommodation. Consequently, waiting becomes a sociological entry point for understanding everyday life, as well as the

power relations, practices, and meanings associated with time, dignity, and recognition.

This study calls for waiting to be reconsidered as a revealing sociological indicator of the nature of the relationship between citizens and institutions, rather than merely as an organisational or administrative problem. Furthermore, it opens up new avenues for researching the impact of digital transformations on this experience. Will digitalisation help to reduce waiting times and enhance recognition of citizens, or will it give rise to new forms of waiting within digital spaces through different patterns of control over time and information? This question remains open for future socio-anthropological research to explore the transformation of power and waiting in the context of digital society.

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