

Waiting – Anthropological and Sociological Reflections

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Abstract

The phenomenon of waiting has occupied the human mind for a long time already. Writers like Franz Kafka or Samuel Beckett have created novels and plays which highlight the existential dimension of waiting; an approach which they have in common with various philosophers who have written about the topic. Whereas the existential mode of waiting they describe negates our customary routines and urges us to bring our life into question, everyday situations of waiting are usually taken for granted and seem to be unproblematic. In the “natural attitude” (Edmund Husserl), we practically know how to wait and have no interest in the deeper meanings of waiting.

The present paper offers an explanation for this circumstance. By going back to anthropological reflections it shows that the human disposition or capacity to wait is of a unique nature, insofar as the somewhat strict boundaries which delimit future oriented behavior among animals are largely dissolved in the case of mankind. This brings along specific problems for the waiting individual; problems which must be settled within a social framework. Every society faces the task of organizing waiting situations, faces the task of standardizing waiting behavior by setting relevant rules and norms, thus turning everyday waiting into a matter of course. Institutionalization, however, is a double-edged sword, since it not only provides action orientation for the individual, but also facilitates manipulation and thus the exercise of power and domination.

Anthropological reflections on waiting thus automatically lead over to sociological considerations and may inform a general theoretical framework for sociological research on the topic.