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## Waiting during the time of COVID-19

Today, millions of people around the world wait under various forms of quarantine. We wait for the numbers to lower, for the vaccine to be invented or for the virus to magically disappear. Waiting has become the new norm. And this time, we are kept in the dark regarding both the length and the outcome of the wait.

To date, only a few anthropological works have addressed waiting as an analytical category in its own right (Jeffrey 2010; Hage 2009; Janeja and Bandak 2018; Auyero 2012). This lack may not be accidental because, due to the productivist discourses of speed and efficiency in our neoliberal era, the ability to wait seems to be scarce. This period, where one-fifth of the world's population is under lockdown, poses an excellent opportunity for anthropologists to dive deep into the phenomenon of waiting.

First of all, we can pose various questions about the interplay between agency and waiting. While waiting usually entails powerlessness, currently, by simply waiting, we are actively doing something important that protects us and others. Here, waiting signifies agency and advancement; it is a politically and ethically loaded disposition that involves a shift in perspective from the immediate to the long-term.

This question can be combined with an exploration of how collective and individual waiting is experienced. Is waiting a form of action or the deferment of action? Under the monotony of lockdown, time itself is stretched out and prolonged. Simultaneously, each day, we witness several attempts at providing this waiting direction and scope. Various online activities and products promise to break the tedium and bring out our creativity and hidden talents. We need to explore

how people shift between these modalities of empty waiting to focused, purposeful waiting.

Further, we need to unravel the relations between doubt, uncertainty and hope *vis-à-vis* waiting. During these days, waiting for the aftermath intensifies. The imagined repercussions of the virus create both utopian and dystopic visions. Some of us anticipate a bright future where consumerist appetites and hyper-individualism is tempered, and global solidarity and ecological consciousness prevails. For others, coronavirus is a dry run for an apocalyptic future of economic devastation and consequences of the new surveillance systems. Does our waiting oscillate between these variegated stances? What forms of affective fusion can this entanglement produce?

We also need to be attentive to the wider structures that shape our understanding and practice of waiting, namely to the various engagements with the structural and institutional conditions that compel people to wait. In what ways are the 'poetics of waiting' intertwined with the 'politics of waiting' in different regions?

Finally, what does this waiting teach us about our own methodology? In the words of Janeja and Bandak: 'how can we use the ethnographic method and the various forms of waiting it entails in exploring the phenomenon of waiting' (2018: 2)?

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ARJUN APPADURAI

# The COVID exception

We are living in the midst of an exception but it is not an exception that the usual prominent theorists of Western academia (Agamben, Badiou, Butler, Žižek) have