Queuetopia: how capitalism fell in love with waiting in line

By Rachel Balmer

On a dark winter evening in January 1950, the locals of a small suburban town gathered in the hall of the girls' high school. It was a night long anticipated. The war was finally over and the scent of a General Election was in the air. Winston Churchill - Member of Parliament for Woodford and leader of the opposition - was here to make a speech to his constituents.

Taking to the stage in the school hall, he declared: "The socialist dream is no longer Utopia but Queuetopia. And if they have the power, this part of their dream will certainly come true."[1] "They" referred to the Labour party, which had secured a landslide victory at the 1945 election, led by Clement Attlee. He had created the Welfare State, a social security net that would be life-changing for many in Britain.

Attlee went on to win the 1950 election and Britain did not become the Soviet nightmare that Churchill had anticipated. However, in his short oration Churchill effectively harnessed a fear which gripped many Britons at the time: that the hardship of post-war life could continue indefinitely. To many, queuing was so closely linked to privation, scarcity and most importantly, socialism, that waiting in line did not have a role in rebuilding post-war Britain as a successful capitalist economy. The Conservatives took advantage of this fear to make a comeback in the next election in late 1951.[2]

In his speech, Churchill sullied the dream of socialism with the image of the queue, a signifier of hardship and economic mismanagement. To him, the queue differentiated a successful and democratic capitalist economy from a chaotic and authoritarian socialist state, one that he was keen to distance himself from.

This essay argues - through tracing the significance of the queue in socialist and capitalist societies - that the queue has only recently shaken off its negative connotations. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, capitalist societies have embraced queuing as a more effective and democratic mechanism for distribution, governed by unwritten rules and behavioural norms, to adapt to life in a pandemic. Whilst waiting is an intrinsic part of socialist realisation, it is something that capitalism tries to actively 'design out' of its systems.

The threat of Soviet queue-biquity

Labour's socialist utopia was, in Churchill's view, a baseless fantasy. The only thing to show for it would be "permanent, continuous" queues,[3] which were already common in post-war Britain due to food shortages. Scenes in Manchester were now comparable to scenes in Moscow and from Churchill's perspective, the queue was evidence of a failure of the state and socialist ideology.

Whereas Britons experienced rationing for 14 years, food and consumer goods shortages persevered for most of the USSR's existence. Churchill feared that the Soviet breadlines would become a permanent fixture in Britain and would lead to social unrest. This was the case in 1917 when Lenin captured the imagination of the masses with the saying "Peace, land, bread," during the October Revolution. But food shortages were no less persistent after

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[1] Richard M Langworth, Churchill by Himself: The Definitive Collection of Quotations, 2013 <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soas-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5503195> [accessed 31 May 2021].

[2] BBC, 'The 1951 Election - BBC Politics 97', BBC <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/politics97/background/pastelec/ge51.shtml> [accessed 26 June 2021].

[3] Langworth.

the Revolution: the centrally planned economy did not incentivise the production of higher quality or more goods. In the countryside, millions died in the famine of 1932-33 through forced grain acquisition and the collectivisation of agriculture. In the city, shoppers had to stand in a different queue for each product they were buying, and then another queue for the cashier.

Even in 1990, when the most universal symbol of American capitalism - McDonald's - opened in the USSR, 5,000 people queued up to get their hands on a meal. One visitor recalled standing in line for eight hours.[4] The grind of daily life wasn't lost on politicians either. Former Prime Minister John Major recalled President Gorbachev telling a joke about the crowds in Moscow, queuing for bread: "one man turned in the queue to his neighbour and said: 'I'm fed up with this, I blame Gorbachev, I'm going to kill Gorbachev,' and off he went. He came back two days later and the people in the queue said: 'Did you kill Gorbachev?' 'No,' he replied 'The queue to kill Gorbachev was just too long'."[5]

Queuing and ideology as delayed gratification

When Churchill predicted Britain's future as a "Queuetopia", he did more than coin a convenient portmanteau. Andrew Chapman, whose thesis explores how queuing is encoded in Soviet culture, writes that queuing and utopia as concepts "present an ideal that often falls short in practice."[6] Chapman explains that whilst queuing was a ubiquitous and mundane part of Soviet daily life, the queue could also be understood through the "ideological discourse of the era." He explains that "Soviet culture adopted elements of tolerance and patience in its notion of progress"[7] such as the slogan used by Lenin "One step forward, two steps back," implying that progress is closely linked with delay. Socialist realisation is predicated on waiting and enduring, sacrificing the present in favour of the promise of the future. In Soviet queues, as with the realisation of utopia, it was rare that you got what you were waiting for.

The queue was also a microcosm of Soviet society: a collective of people, with a collective goal. It reinforced group cooperation and was a cross-section of society. The queue is dynamic: it ebbs and flows, contracts and grows. It also became a way to instrumentalise socialist ideology: queuing was the most equitable way to allocate scarce resources to a population. Standing in line was an act of subscription to the regime. Though the ubiquity of queues in the USSR was testament to the state's failure to provide sufficient supplies to meet its citizens' demands, citizens joined the queue to survive, no matter their political preferences.

Capitalism's answer to the queue

In capitalist economies, queues are a temporary solution to market failure. They are a method of dealing with short-term fluctuations in demand.[8] There may even be some hidden benefits. In a result reminiscent of the Soviet principles of delayed gratification, some studies have found that a queue (for non-essential items) can signal value and increase satisfaction. In a waiting experiment, a participant who received a smoothie after having queued up reported that the smoothie tasted better than the person who did not have to wait.[9]

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[4] Mitya Kushelevich, 'The Calvert Journal', Taste of Freedom: What the Closure of the First Moscow McDonald's Means for Russia Today, 2014 <https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/3046/mcdonalds-moscow-closure-russia-martin-parr>.

[5] Bridget Kendall, 'New Light Shed on 1991 Anti-Gorbachev Coup', *BBC News*, 2011 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-14560280>.

[6] Andrew H. Chapman, 'Queuetopia: Second-World Modernity and the Soviet Culture of Allocation' (University of Pittsburgh, 2013). P.6.

[7] Chapman. P.14

[8] Stephen Dubner, 'What Are You Waiting For?', Freakonomics <https://freakonomics.com/podcast/what-are-you-waiting-for/>.

[9] Minjung Koo and Ayelet Fishbach, 'A Silver Lining of Standing in Line: Queuing Increases Value of Products', Journal of Marketing Research, 47.4 (2010), 713–24 <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.47.4.713>.

Where possible, capitalist societies have discovered ways to optimise the queuing 'experience'. The discipline of queue management science offers advice to managers with guides promising "to put right brain and left brain to use, meshing art and science to create an efficient and enjoyable process for all."[10] Disney invented the switchback queue (which snakes back and forth) during the 1964-65 World Fair. This redesign encouraged interaction between guests, and people complained about waiting far less. It also fit more people in a much smaller space. Drawing on other psychological principles, such as providing customers with estimated wait times, also improved the experience of waiting in line.[11]

You can also spend money, rather than your time, in a queue. A secondary market has emerged where professional line-standers will wait for you. One company in the US advertises its services to queue for the latest iPhone, a pair of trainers, or even a Covid test. According to its website, two hours of queuing costs $45 (the minimum amount you can pay for). Lobbyists, keen to gain access to congressional committees where proposed legislation is being discussed, will also pay people to stand and wait on their behalf. [12]

Anyone familiar with regional European airports will be familiar with one airline's strategy to optimise the queue. Ryanair, through its notorious system of 'priority boarding,' allows customers to skip the normal queue and instead…form a new queue. Ryanair recently came last in a survey on customer satisfaction for airlines. The analysis of the survey stated that "several respondents were bewildered as to why, after paying for 'priority boarding', they were left standing in a long queue of other people who had done exactly the same thing."[13]

The democratic queue

Whilst Churchill perceived the queue to be a Soviet scourge of inefficiency, it is important to recognise the democratic principles inherent in queueing (as it relates to the way it appeals or is adapted to the masses). Queues seek to allocate remaining resources on a first come, first serve basis, and broadly, people are served based on the amount of time invested. Queues are generally seen as an equitable method of distribution, and queue jumpers are disincentivised through the unspoken norms and behaviours governing standing in line and keeping order.[14] There are no laws to say that you must form a line and individual incentive would suggest that going straight to the front is preferable. But a deep sense of injustice is generated when we see someone skipping the line. There is an element of 'strong reciprocity' attached to queuing. Most humans have an instinct to cooperate if everyone else is playing fair. If they don't, we may reciprocate with a disproportionate punishment and order may break down.[15]

But queues can also obstruct democracy, in its more usual sense. When the US electorate went to the polls in 2020, pictures showed people waiting up to four hours at polling stations. In 2008, two researchers explored what factors led to lines at polling stations. Queues are a "visible indication that something is wrong", they said, "yet little reliable information is available to explain the operational inefficiencies that lead to lines at polling stations or guide

[10] 'The Art & Science of Queuing: A Guide to Queue Management' (Lavi Industries) <https://www.lavi.com/upload/blogArticle/635991264984072000.pdf>.
[11] Luis Perez Cortes and Kevin Close, 'Designing Experience: A Case Study of Disneyland's Lines', Talking about Design, 2020 <https://talkingaboutdesign.com/designing-experience-a-case-study-of-disneylands-lines/>.
[12] Michael J. Sandel, What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets, 1. publ (London: Allen Lane, 2012).
[13] Trevor Baker, 'Passengers Rate Ryanair Worst Airline, with British Airways Not Far Behind', 19 December 2019 <https://www.which.co.uk/news/2019/12/passengers-rate-ryanair-worst-airline-with-british-airways-not-far-behind/>.
[14] Simon Gächter, 'In the Lab and the Field: Punishment Is Rare in Equilibrium', Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 35.1 (2012), 26–28 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X11001415>.
[15] David Robson, 'We Hate to Admit It, but Brits Aren't the Best at Queuing', BBC Future, 21 March 2017 <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20170320-we-hate-to-admit-it-but-brits-arent-the-best-at-queuing> [accessed 24 July 2021].

policy makers in their choice of remedy."[16] In a survey conducted after the 2008 elections, 11% of respondents who did not vote cited long lines as a major factor in their decision to stay home, suggesting that long lines may have discouraged up to 2.6 million people from voting.[17]

Queuing and Covid-19

In March 2020, queues again became a part of daily life in many countries. Queues of people, snaking round the block as they waited to get their hands on the last pack of pasta. Supplies such as tinned tomatoes and long-life milk were rationed. Hand sanitiser and soap were being sold on the black market at marked-up prices.

However, in the UK, there was a way to skip the queues. The vulnerable or the elderly were allowed into the shops before anyone else. NHS workers were suddenly 'heroes' and one reward for this contribution to society was fast-tracking the queue. Many cited a sense of communal experience as they found themselves lining up outside the shop, not knowing what was left on the shelves. In addition, the vaccination roll-out across Europe has been carried out in priority order according to need, given to the elderly, vulnerable and health care workers first, followed by the rest of the population. Rather than a market failure, queues and prioritisation have facilitated fairer distribution to those that need it most.

Queue-topia once more?

The beauty of the queue is that its mundanity and ubiquity bely its ability to tell us something about the state of democracy and the economy. In the USSR, the queue was both a symptom of state failure but the ideological tool which the state used to generate allegiance to and dependence on a regime. When Churchill declared that Britain might become a "queuetopia" he feared that it would be a by-word for shortage and struggle. Rather, the queue has been embraced as the most 'democratic' form of allocation, governed by strong unwritten rules of behaviour and order. Attempts to optimise it have generally been unsuccessful, and during the pandemic it has become the mechanism to provide for those who need it most: a symbol of state paternalism. Next time you're in a queue, think about it, and your coffee might even taste better after the wait.

[16] Douglas M. Spencer and Zachary S. Markovits, 'Long Lines at Polling Stations? Observations from an Election Day Field Study', Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy, 9.1 (2010), 3–17 <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2009.0046>.
[17] Spencer and Markovits.