WAITING

Edited by Ghassan Hage

MUP ACADEMIC MONOGRAPHS

CHAPTER 8

Waiting Out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality

Ghassan Hage

That a viable life presupposes a form of imaginary mobility, a sense that one is 'going somewhere'—what I have called existential mobility—is something that has strongly emerged in both my research on transnational Lebanese migration as well as my work on white racists in the West. In a sense both the migrants and the racists seek existential mobility and aim to avoid its opposite, a sense of existential immobility or what I will be referring to here as 'stuckedness'. Although one can find evidence of people experiencing various forms of stuckedness at all times and in all places, I will argue below that the social and historical conditions of permanent crisis we live in have led to a proliferation and intensification of this sense of stuckedness. What's more, there is an increasing sense that stuckedness has been normalised. Rather than being perceived as something one needs to get out of at any cost, it is now *also* experienced, ambivalently, as an inevitable pathological state which has to be endured. In this essay, I am looking at this process whereby 'stuckedness in crisis' is transformed into an endurance test. As I will argue, such a mode of confronting the crisis by a celebration of one's capacity to stick it out rather than calling for change, contains a specific experience of waiting that is referred to in common language as

'waiting it out'. As such, it is this *waiting out* of the crisis that I am examining.

In my work on migration, I have taken seriously the equation of well-being with a sense of mobility that is present in common everyday statements such as 'How are you going?' This equation is present in many other languages. In Lebanese dialect one asks '*Keef el haal?*' which literally means: 'How is the state of your being?'. And the common reply is '*Mehsheh'l haal*' which literally means: 'The state of my being is walking'.[1] I have tried to work with an understanding that such language of movement is not simply metaphoric but conveys a sense in which when a person feels well, they actually imagine and feel that they are moving well. Existential mobility is this type of imagined/felt movement. As far as migration is concerned, I have shown that people engage in the physical form of mobility that we call migration because they are after existential mobility. This differs from the physical movement of tourists, for instance, whose physical mobility (travel) is part of their accumulation of existential mobility. In a sense, we can say that people migrate because they are looking for a space that constitutes a suitable launching pad for their social and existential self. They are looking for a space and a life where they feel they are going somewhere as opposed to nowhere, or at least, a space where the quality of their 'going-ness' is better than what it is in the space they are leaving behind. More often than not, what is referred to as 'voluntary' migration then is either an inability or an unwillingness to endure and 'wait out' a crisis of existential mobility.

As I have pointed out above, this kind of comparative existential mobility has also come out as an issue in my work on certain specific forms of white racism that are marked by resentment and envy towards immigrants as well as ethnic and racial minorities.[2] While analysing this form of racism it became clear that it was shaped far more by a comparative sense of mobility than by simple class location. For instance, there is a common belief, especially among cosmopolitan small-l liberals, that the racism of the followers of Pauline Hanson in Australia, like that of the followers of Le Pen in France towards immigrants, is a 'working-class' form of racism. This is not the case. Hansonite and Le Pennist racism is primarily derived from a sense of 'mobility envy' by people from all classes who felt

they weren't moving 'well enough'. This was sometimes voiced explicitly in terms of social-mobility envy: such as white Australians resenting the presence of so many Indian-background doctors in their hospitals. But ultimately, it was existential mobility that was at issue. Thus, in interviews I conducted, some white racists exhibited racial resentment towards minorities even when they themselves were located in a 'higher' socioeconomic group than those minorities they were racialising.

Mobility envy followed a pattern similar to the following paradigmatic story: The story begins with the 'established/white' person owning a nice car and the immigrant 'outsider' who has just moved to the neighbourhood buying themselves a motorbike. Some time after settling, however, the immigrant neighbour buys a car while the established person still owns the same car. One begins to notice that racial resentment starts kicking into the discourse of the white/established person even if the car they own is much better than the car just bought by the immigrant. What the racists become envious of, then, is not the ownership of the car itself (since they already own a better one) but the mobility implied in the move from a motorbike to a car at a time when they feel that they have remained stuck where they are. It is in this sense that I am arguing that just as there is an imaginary existential mobility, there is an imagined existential stuckedness. This form of stuckedness is existential in that it does not necessarily coincide with lack of social mobility. One can be in a job and climbing the social ladder within that job yet still feel stuck in it. This highlights the fact that social and existential mobility are not the same thing, even though they tend to coincide in a number of social situations.

It is on the basis of observing patterns of behaviour similar to the above that I have argued that, in Australia, there was a link between the racism towards Indigenous people and immigrants exhibited by the white racist Hansonites and the latter's sense of stuckedness generated by neo-liberal globalisation and, particularly by the insecurity in job tenure that has increased the sense of 'being stuck in one's job' everywhere around the world.[3] The precariousness of their tenure made them feel constantly worried about losing their jobs and they felt as if someone were constantly watching them and

waiting for them to make a mistake so they could have a reason to sack them. This made their working culture increasingly claustrophobic. Interestingly for me, my research on Hansonism at the time of its emergence also coincided with what became known in Australia as the Thredbo disaster, a landslide at Australia's most famed ski resort in which a number of people were killed, buried under earth, rubble and snow. One person, Stuart Diver, survived under the rubble, in freezing temperatures, stuck under a slab of cement. All of Australia celebrated his endurance and survival. But what attracted my attention was the particular resonance this story of survival had in the white cultural milieus I was researching. To me, it seemed clear that this resonance was the product of a form of imagined affinity between the sense of being both socially and existentially stuck that was expressed by many Hansonites, and the stuckedness of Stuart Diver under the landslide. The celebration of his survival was a celebration of a 'heroism of the stuck'. With this form of heroism, it is not what you actively or creatively achieve that makes you a hero but your capacity to stick it out and 'get stuck well', so to speak. To be a hero under such circumstances is to be resilient enough to endure stuckedness, or, to put it in a way relevant to us here, it is to be able to *wait out* your stuckedness. It is also to be able to wait for deliverance so as to come out as a survivor and start 'moving' again. This heroic endurance spoke to many Hansonites who, in the absence of social alternatives, celebrated the heroism of ordinary people who simply endured a life where a sense of stuckedness prevailed as their social world was crumbling around them under the effect of globalisation, the rising precariousness of their hold over their jobs and the intensified migration that changed the shape of the cultural world they inhabit. This sat ambivalently with a continued desire to see themselves move existentially.

It is important to note carefully what it is about stuckedness that allows heroism. At first glance, being stuck presumes a lack of agency. Indeed it is lack of agency that defines stuckedness whether physically or existentially understood. As such, stuckedness is by definition a situation where a person suffers from both the absence of choices or alternatives to the situation they are in and an inability to grab such alternatives even if they present themselves. So, how can one be a hero when by definition one is in a situation where one does not do

much? I think the heroism of stuckedness lies in this ability to snatch agency in the very midst of its lack. This is what the notion of endurance implies: asserting some agency over the very fact that one has no agency by not succumbing and becoming a mere victim and an object in circumstances that are conspiring to make a total agentless victim and object out of you. In this way, a certain nobility of spirit and an assertion of one's 'freedom as a human' oozes out of the very notion of 'endurance', which comes to negate the dehumanisation implied by a situation of 'stuckedness'.

More than a decade has passed since the Thredbo disaster, but it is notable how this 'heroism of the stuck' has become a pervasive generalised cultural form not just in Australia but all over the world. With every earthquake, flood and other natural or war-induced disaster involving the crumbling of buildings and the burying of people alive comes a celebration of survival: an almost competitive account of finding people who have survived being buried alive, stuck, for two, three, four and five days under the rubble etc.

One can note a shift of sensibility that accompanies this redefinition of heroism in people's reactions towards a well-reported incident that occurred in the Himalayas. A climber who was successfully achieving his ascent of the mountain met with another climber who had encountered difficulties and was basically 'stuck' midway through his climb. It was an encounter between the hero as 'a climber' and an 'achiever' and the hero as 'stuck'. That people's sympathy went overwhelmingly toward the person who was stuck reflected more than a common sympathy with 'victims' and the 'underdog'. It reflected a transformation in what Raymond Williams would call the structure of feeling built around collective notions of heroism.[4] But this also means that there is a sense of community among those who 'wait out' the crisis. In the paradigmatic example of white racist resentment that I gave above I argued that the established/white person experiences a form of mobility envy in the face of the immigrant who has purchased a car. But there is another, more communal sense in which resentment is experienced: the migrant who is achieving mobility is like any 'petty bourgeois' achiever. S/he is standing out as different from the 'community'. S/he is exhibiting an unwillingness to be part of the community of the stuck. The ethnic difference of the immigrant becomes coupled with a social/cultural

difference based precisely on their perceived unwillingness to wait out the crisis 'like the rest of us'.

The fascination with stuckedness is increasingly permeating popular culture. It is striking, for instance, how, of all the possible angles from which one can approach the 9/11 terrorist attack on New York's twin towers, Oliver Stone's film based on the event was in large part about the heroism of the people stuck in the tower's rubble waiting for deliverance. There is clearly something timeless and universal about this celebration of the human spirit to endure. This universality exists even when each celebration also takes a cultural form specific to where it is occurring. In this paper, however, I am neither interested in the universal nor the culturally specific aspect of this heroism of the stuck. Rather I want to examine the historical specificity of its significance today, particularly as it becomes articulated to a celebration of a form of waiting, or more specifically, a 'waiting out' or weathering of a crisis situation where the self is experiencing existential immobility. 'Waiting out' is a specific form of waiting where one is not waiting for something but rather waiting for something undesirable that has come, like a spell of cold weather or a disliked guest, to end or to go. Unlike waiting that can be passive or active, 'waiting out' is always passive, yet its passivity is, as I have pointed out, an ambivalent one. It involves both a subjection to the elements or to certain social conditions and at the same time a braving of these conditions. It is this ambivalence that allows it to take the heroic forms discussed above. It is also this ambivalence that, as I want to now argue, makes it a governmental tool that encourages a mode of restraint, self-control and self-government in times of crisis.

In his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Jean-Paul Sartre famously aims for an 'existential' reconceptualisation of the Marxist notion of the revolutionary class or masses. He rethinks Marx's well-known differentiation between class-in-itself and class-for-itself in terms of what he calls the difference between the '*serie*' and the 'fused group'. The *serie* is a collective that appears together only from the outside. In fact, it is what Sartre terms 'a plurality of isolations'. Interestingly for us, the example that Sartre gives of a *serie* is that of people queuing for a bus at a bus stop.[5] The *serie* unites and separates at the same time. The degree of isolation of the people waiting

(together nonetheless) reflects what Sartre wonderfully calls their 'degree of massification'. Sartre argues that this is the law that governs most social organisations at work. We can see in this a hint of the self-disciplining in what Foucault will later call governmentality in so far as it is a technique of individualisation and the internalisation of a mode of governing the self. The queue where one governs oneself into waiting in an orderly fashion is one form of such 'serial governmentality'.

What interested Sartre, however, is not so much this analysis of the alienation that is inherent to this serial governmentality—in this he was reconceptualising an old problematic that was already notably dealt with by Rousseau and Hegel among many others. Rather Sartre wanted above all to examine and detail the process that led people to move from this individualised passive state to become active agents of history: how the '*serie*' is transformed into 'fused group'. Interestingly for us, Alain Badiou, commenting on this piece, portrays this coming together of the fused group as a disruption of orderly waiting in the queue.[6]

Suppose the bus does not come? he invites us to think. People start to feel agitated. People start talking to each other not about the banal things they usually do to fill up time while waiting but about the unbearability and inhumanity of being subjected to such conditions external to themselves. And suddenly our communication with the other is made on the basis that they, like us, find waiting unbearable. From the formula 'Everyone is the same as the other in so far as they are other to themselves', we move to the formula 'The other is the same as I since I am no longer my other'. As Badiou puts it, 'in the *serie* the Other is everywhere. In the fused group the same is everywhere.'[7]

For Badiou (and for Sartre), as for many sociologists who have worked on queuing, the queue symbolises social order. But Sartre reminds us that the queue encourages self-government in so far as it is moving, in so far as it is working as a mode of regulating access to resources etc ... Once it stops working Badiou sees both a social crisis and a crisis of governmentality. Let us examine the Sartrian/Badiouian example from our perspective. Queuing for the bus involves at one level an orderly form of mobility. In so far as the buses keep coming the queue moves and people feel they are moving,

physically and existentially. When the bus does not come this initiates a 'crisis'. This is not only a social crisis that perturbs the flow of buses and the flow of people queuing but also a crisis felt by each individual queuing in the sense that, when the queue stalls, the people queuing experience a sense of immobility—they are no longer going somewhere, they are now 'stuck' in the queue. In this sense, to reinterpret Sartre and Badiou from our perspective, it is this state of stuckedness that triggers the questioning of the existing social arrangement and leads to the social upheaval that transforms the *serie* into a fused group. We see here the revolutionary optimism in formulation. It is an optimism characteristic of Sartre's time and still shared by Badiou: crisis is an unusual state of affairs that brings about upheaval, a rethinking of the social order (that is, the modality of waiting) and the formation of a revolutionary force (no more waiting!). One can recall here the way Herbert Marcuse addressed the students in the early seventies: 'We should not wait. We cannot wait and what's more we do not have to wait'.

I want to argue that the reflections on stuckedness I have developed in this essay emphasise that the perspective of our time on crisis and order is different from the way crisis and order are perceived in the Sartrian-Badiouian arguments above. Crisis today is no longer felt as an unusual state of affairs that invites the citizen to question the given order. Rather, it is perceived more as a normalcy, or to use what is becoming perhaps an over-used concept, crisis is a kind of permanent state of exception. In this sense, enduring the crisis becomes the normal mode of being a good citizen and the more one is capable of enduring a crisis the more of a good citizen one is. As usual this takes on a racial, civilisational and class dimension: the ones who do not know how to wait are the 'lower classes', the uncivilised and racialised others. The civilised, approximating the image of the hero, are those who get stuck in a classy way. They know how to endure.

It is here that the heroism of the stuck seems to me to signal a deeper form of governmentality, a governmentality that is reproduced even in times of crisis. Even when the bus does not come, even when people are feeling stuck in a queue that is not moving, they heroically keep on queuing. And this is self-reproducing: the more one waits and invests in waiting, the more reluctant one is to stop waiting.

What we have therefore is a new form of governmentality that invites and indeed valorises self-control in times of crisis. Today, I go on the plane and I am told that there is always a possibility of a 'crisis' and I need to be prepared, know about oxygen masks, exits etc ... so that if a crisis comes I am prepared to self-govern myself even in such demanding times. Even when possibly facing death I should learn to act in an orderly fashion. Here, queuing, even in the midst of disaster, is understood as something one has to do. And far from being perceived as cowardly to remain 'inactive' and non-revolutionary in the face of crisis, to 'wait out' the crisis is perceived as something that one is proud to do. It is a mark of a deepening of the civilisation process. It is civilised to know how to endure a crisis and act in an orderly, self-governed, restrained fashion. It is the uncivilised 'third world–looking masses' that are imagined to be running amok in the face of crisis. One can see the two faces of this racialised civilisational gap during the Katrina disaster. One can also see it in Australia in the latter-day vilification of refugees as 'queue jumpers': people unable to wait for their turn. Likewise, the Parisian boys who revolt in the suburbs are not seen as ushering in a revolution. They are seen as 'trash', as they were famously referred to by the French president Nicolas Sarkozy when he was interior minister. They are so partly because, within this racialised civilisational discourse, they, and not their social situation, are perceived to be the problem. Indeed they are not seen by many of their detractors as living in especially difficult conditions. Everyone is living in especially difficult conditions in the eyes of such people. For the latter, what marks such boys is not the social condition of crisis but the fact that they do not know how to wait out and endure the crisis 'like everyone else'.

Perhaps this is one of the more important problematics that the radical imaginary of the past has to face, as the desire for existential mobility sits ambivalently with this celebration of heroic stasis. How can one reimagine 'being revolutionary' at a time when to be revolutionary in the old Marxist or Sartrian sense is to be 'vulgar', 'impatient', uncivilised and unable to 'wait properly'.

Notes

1 See Hage, 'A Not So Multi-sited Ethnography of a Not So Imagined Community'.

2 See Hage, *White Nation*.
3 See the whole issue 'L'insecurite comme condition de travail'.
4 Williams, *Marxism and Literature*.
5 Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, pp. 256–7.
6 Badiou, *Petit Pantheon Portatif*.
7 Ibid.

In this rich and insightful collection of essays, leading anthropologist Ghassan Hage brings together academics across political science, philosophy, anthropology and sociology for an examination into the experience of waiting. What is it to wait? What do we wait for? And how is waiting connected to the social worlds in which we live?

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About the editor

Ghassan Hage is Future Generation Professor of Anthropology and Social Theory at the University of Melbourne. He has held many visiting professorships around the world including at Harvard and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. He is the author of many publications on the comparative anthropology of nationalism, migration and inter-cultural relations.

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