
RESEÑAS DE LIBROS / BOOK REVIEWS

AUYERO, JAVIER: *Patients of the State: The Politics of Waiting in Argentina*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

What are we doing, and what is being done to us, when we wait? In this most recent book, Javier Auyero turns his focus on this often invisible feature of social life – the act of waiting. Rather than viewing time spent waiting as empty or as a mere place marker before purposeful action occurs, Auyero directs our attention to the act of waiting itself and the ways in which being made to wait is already productive of social meaning. The book proposes and serves as a “tempography,” tracing how the urban poor of Buenos Aires perceive and experience time spent waiting. Being made to wait, coupled with a lack of consistency and transparency as to the reasons for the delay or expected duration of the wait, operates, Auyero argues, as a means of political domination and subordination to the state. This domination relegates the poor to the status of “patients,” a term Auyero uses in order to highlight how the process of waiting manufactures a particular kind of subject who knows that they must patiently endure and comply with “arbitrary, ambiguous, and always changing” requirements in order to obtain benefits or effective action from the state (page 9).

To illustrate how this process looks on the ground, the book draws on field observations from three sites where waiting is commonplace – the national registrar’s office (where personal ID cards are issued), a welfare office, and the field site from Auyero’s previous book, the neighborhood of Flamable, where residents await resolution to the intoxication of their environment by large petrochemical companies. Drawing on the etymological roots of the word ‘patience’ meaning to suffer or to endure, Auyero tells us how, in each of these sites, petitioners learn to be patient and, in the process, become patients of the state. This process of subject formation is effective in part because it is part of a broader matrix of “urban relegation,” or the means by which the state disciplines and regulates the poor. The book places the act of waiting within the context of three forms of exerting control, identified as visible kicks, clandestine fists, and invisible tentacles. Being made to wait under ambiguous conditions for an uncertain resolution forms part of the invisible tentacles that complement the more direct forms of repression, such as high rates of incarceration and forced eviction

(visible kicks), or violent acts by well-located and well-connected para-police forces (clandestine fists). These three forms work together, Auyero argues, to manufacture acquiescence, and though he is careful to mention that these forms of domination are never complete but always partial and negotiated, the book's ethnographic data is dedicated to demonstrating the exasperated compliance of those seeking out engagement with the state.

The ample use of ethnographic (or tempographic) material is both one of the book's strengths and one of its main weaknesses. All the chapters save the introduction and conclusion contain extensive excerpts from field notes and interviews collected by Auyero and his research team. These provide the reader with an up-close view of the spaces where waiting occurs and the words of the occupants of these spaces. Yet in doing so, the excerpts at times feel disconnected from the more analytical information presented around them, and, as the book progresses, some of them become repetitive, providing further examples of what Auyero seeks to tell us without adding much in the way of substance. Furthermore, if the author had included more interviews with the state agents who form the human faces with whom these 'patients' interact, this could have provided a deeper exploration of the production of these spaces.

The book's main strength lies in its reflections on the idea of waiting and its proposals for the study of the experience of time. In delineating its topics, the book draws on social scientific, philosophical, and literary treatments of the idea of waiting. Auyero dedicates one chapter specifically to these considerations, taking up especially how waiting operates in García Márquez's *El Coronel no tiene quien le escriba*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and Kafka's *The Trial*. In doing so he provides interesting reflections on the theme, though this section could have perhaps been more productively incorporated into the rest of the book rather than presented separately as its own chapter.

Overall, the book suggests an intriguing area of study, particularly for those concerned with state-subject interactions. Apart from these thought-provoking reflections, specialists on Argentina and Latin America more broadly will find little to surprise them but much that rings true. Its focus on the urban poor and the detailed descriptions of their recurrent experiences with the multiple arms of the state make this book a useful tool for teaching about the current realities of Latin American cities and the lives of their inhabitants.

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