

THE QUEUE: BUREAUCRATIC TIME, DISTRIBUTED LEGALITY, AND THE WORK OF WAITING IN MIGRANT MOSCOW

ABSTRACT

The contemporary Russian migration regime is grounded in an artificial shortage of legal labour. For migrant workers from ‘visa-free’ states of the former Soviet Union, becoming and remaining documented requires mastering the queue as a distinct social and institutional form. Exploring the everyday tactics of ‘occupying the queue’ among migrant workers from Kyrgyzstan, this paper brings an existentially sensitive perspective on migration into conversation with an anthropology of legal time, attentive to the ways in which being ‘stuck in motion’ emerges through the conjunction of competing tempi of work, life, and legalization. A focus on the queue as social form draws attention to the embodied labour of synchronization: the physical and social effort entailed in integrating the disjunctive temporal regimes of paid work and documentary verification in contexts of legal precarity. In so doing, the article critically interrogates assumptions of ‘empty time’ in recent anthropological work on waiting.

Keywords: queue, waiting, time, synchronization, im/mobility, Kyrgyzstan, Russia

In a wide-ranging anthropological review article, Laura Bear (2016: 488) explores what she refers to as a ‘temporal turn within our discipline’, noting the ways in which recent anthropological scholarship has addressed the marking and management of time (in studies, for instance, of contemporary capitalism), and the ethical and social navigation of competing timescapes or temporal logics (such as the navigation of care within regimes of mutual indebtedness [Han 2012; see also Bear 2014]). While this interest in the temporal dimensions of experience is perhaps sufficient to constitute a ‘turn’ within the broader discipline, it is striking how differently that moment has played out

within different subfields. Anthropological studies of migration, for instance, still have much more to say about the *spatial* dimensions of contemporary (im)mobility than they do about migration’s temporal dimensions. Literatures explicitly dealing with migration receive little mention in Bear’s (2016) wide-ranging review, while studies of contemporary migration are only beginning to engage in a theoretically rigorous way with categories of time and temporality (see also Andersson 2014; Baas and Yeoh 2019; Cwerner 2001; Griffiths et al 2013). As Robertson (2014) notes in a study of ‘the temporary’ in Australian temporary worker schemes, time often appears

as a residual category in studies of migration, perhaps because of the enduring assumption that migration itself is a linear process of movement from A to B that will eventually end with incorporation into a new nation-state. This has often left the temporal, in Robertson's words, as 'a subordinate element in discussions of space and spatiality (...); recognized as an implicit part of processes of migration, but seldom explicitly theorized' (2014: 1917).

This paper seeks to contribute to this growing conversation around the temporality of migration by bringing an existentially sensitive perspective on migration (Graw and Schielke 2012; Jackson 2013; Lucht 2015) into conversation with an anthropology of legal time. Taking my cue from the Guest Editors' call for an approach that recognizes that 'states of movement and dwelling are not just physical processes, but inextricably linked to people's ways of being-in-the-world' (Lems and Tošić, this issue), I explore how being 'stuck in motion' emerges through the conjunction of different, sometimes competing, tempi of work, life, and legalization. My substantive concern is with the embodied labour of synchronization in contexts of legal indeterminacy: that is, the physical and social effort entailed in integrating the disjunctive temporal regimes of paid work and documentary verification so as to produce a legally legible and non-deportable self. In so doing, the current essay is also intended as a contribution to—and a commentary upon—the growing anthropology of waiting as social practice (Auyero 2012; Hage 2009; Ibañez-Tirado 2019; Janena and Bandak 2018; Olson 2015; Rotter 2016). I focus on waiting-work in conditions of administrative and legal indeterminacy: more specifically, on *occupying the queue* as a particular kind of social practice through which one's predicament as un- or insufficiently-documented and potentially

deportable registers in and on the body, and through which claims to be or become legally legible are asserted and negotiated.

These concerns first emerged for me as ethnographic and methodological 'itches' during fieldwork in which the search (kyrgyz: *aidoo*, lit. 'chase') for documents among my informants was a consuming element of social life. How to be alert to moments of political sensing, when technologies of selective bureaucratic enforcement register as a presence that penetrates the skin? What is it to know 'here', in the hairs on the back of one's neck, that one is being singled out because of assumptions about one's putative illegality or (non-)right to the city? How to evoke the exhaustion and frustration of standing in line—or in the line to reach a line—especially for stamps, documents, and medical diagnoses that are felt to be *erunda*: a pointless waste? How to capture the defiant assertion to be seen, to be registered, to be made legible? If these questions started as challenges of ethnographic description, they led me to considerations of theoretical practice, specifically with regards to literatures on migrant (il)legalization. How to hold together the 'phenomenological' and the 'political', attentive both to the specificity and irreducibility of individual experiences of waiting-work *and* to the conditions that systematically produce such illegality as a social and political fact? And how to incorporate an analysis of temporal navigation and the labours of synchronization into a critical phenomenology of migrant illegalization?

Like other contributors to this volume my approach is indebted to the insights of phenomenological philosophy that highlight the interplay between circumstance and action; the encounter with a world that acts upon us but which is always, also, unfinished and able to be acted *upon* (Lems 2018; cf. Merleau-Ponty 2003 [1945]). Particularly productive for this enquiry

have been studies that have sought to situate the body at the core of a theoretical understanding of (im)mobility and displacement. If displacement ‘hits the nerve of our time’, as Lems (2018: 17) observes, this should prompt ‘questions about how it is constituted, not just as a theoretical and analytical category, but as lived and thought of in people’s everyday lives’. The same could and should be asked about the condition of migrant ‘irregularity’. For being undocumented (or partially documented, or fictively documented) is not just a political and legal status: it is a profoundly embodied condition of being in the world, one that shapes how the city is inhabited, navigated, and imagined, one that inflects conversations and dreams and intimate relations (Willen 2007).

While I acknowledge a debt to phenomenological anthropology in the analysis that follows, my approach emerges first and foremost from an *ethnographic* commitment, attentive to what people do and how people talk about what they do; how the ‘everyday’ is rendered livable in circumstances that are often cast as those of a ‘living death’ (Round and Kuznetsova 2016). In her study of the effort involved in making a livable life in the context of the US obesity epidemic, a chronic condition of contemporary capitalism ‘where life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable’, Laurent Berlant (2007: 754) draws attention to what she calls forms of ‘lateral agency’. In situations of chronic struggle, Berlant argues, the challenge is to conceptualize agency in non-normative terms, as ‘an activity exercised within spaces of ordinariness that does not always or even usually follow the literalizing logic of visible effectuality, bourgeois dramatics, and lifelong accumulation or fashioning’ (2007: 758).¹ What I understand Berlant to be arguing for in this account of ‘slow death’ is a recognition that agency isn’t necessarily characterized by a relentless struggle

forward, or a heroic attempt to transform or remake the world. In the case of the obesity epidemic that she chronicles, a worker may be so depleted, physically and emotionally, that excessive consumption itself becomes a form of agency, albeit a destructive one. Lateral action is concerned with ‘getting by and living on’ (ibid.: 759) rather than with radical transformation; it is attentiveness to forms of action that are distended and dispersed.

This approach is helpful for thinking about queuing as a form of action aimed at making life durable through sideways or ‘lateral’ action. The queue is not simply a manifestation of suspended or empty time, but neither is it a place of incipient resistance to the perils of legal indeterminacy. The queue, after all, is a paradigmatic ‘space of ordinariness’: queueing is usually slow and rarely dramatic; it is a place, typically, of abrogated freedom. For the anthropologist, queueing is usually something we have to endure in order to get on with what might seem like the ‘real’ action of fieldwork, and is thus rarely the object of explicit ethnographic attention. And yet, as I explore below, working the queue requires skill, knowledge, judgement. For my informants it was a recurrent object of concern: getting the documents together in sequence and in the time-frame required by law—synchronizing labour time and legal time—requires cultivating relationships and mobilising them. It demands frenetic activity as well as patience. It is a space of negotiation and demand.

Focusing on this active work of waiting takes my analysis in a different direction from some of the more normative analysis of migrant experience in Russia. In a recent article, Round and Kuznetsova (2016) argue that the intrinsic violence and human disregard implicit in the migration bureaucracy means that we should focus on the necropolitics of migration

management in contemporary Russia, rather than its biopolitics. ‘The *raison d’être* of Central Asian migrants in Russia from the perspective of the state and the majority of employers’, they argue, ‘is simply and solely as a socio-economic slave body, both individually and collectively, whose labour is abused so political and economic power can be advanced. (...) The majority experience a “slow death” whereby they are “kept alive” in order to produce economic value, but in a state which ensures that they are subservient, with the threat of violence an ever-present background specter’ (2016: 1018, 1022).

Such a perspective, focused on the political-economic logics of illegalization, brackets off precisely the domain of effortful activity that I seek to explore. For all the realities of racialized subordination and labour exploitation, migrant life in Moscow entails a constant negotiation of agency; a constant demand to become legally legible as a condition of making a ‘livable life’ (Kyrgyz: *jakschy jashoo*) in Moscow. This demand—to be seen as a human with a claim upon the city—is at the core of migrant experience: one that animates conversations and “video-clips”, Whatsapp messages and impassioned negotiations with police officers. The queue, as I show below, is a place of profoundly asymmetrical relations, where social and legal inequality registers as a deeply embodied fact. But it is also at the heart of the *demand*: to become legible, to make a claim. As such it is a lens into the lateral agency through which a life is made livable in contexts of systematic marginalisation.

MAKING A LIFE IN MIGRANT MOSCOW

The ethnographic focus of this enquiry is the world that I gloss as ‘Batken Moscow’ in the period between 2010 and 2015. I use this

term to capture the domain of social relations and obligations that is mediated through the dense trans-local networks that connect Moscow, as a place of physically demanding and ‘hurried’ work, with Batken district in southern Kyrgyzstan, 4,000 kilometres away. This is a social world that has taken shape since the early 2000s, as labour migration between rural Kyrgyzstan and Moscow has gone from being an exceptional destination of last resort to an essential and normalized element of household livelihood strategies (Nasritdinov 2016; Reeves 2012; Ruget and Usmanalieva 2008). The period of fieldwork in which I draw in this paper (nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in Batken and Moscow in 2009–2010 and several shorter return visits between 2012 and 2015) was characterized by increasingly stringent regulation of migrant quotas in the wake of the global financial crisis, the Russian oil crisis, as well as the imposition of sanctions that particularly affected Russia’s construction sector. Non-coincidentally, this was also a period of growing anti-immigrant sentiment, with the Moscow mayoral election of 2013 dominated by debates about the impact of migration on the economy, demography, and crime rates in the Russian capital (Reeves 2013b). The paper does not seek to track the considerable shifts in the socio-legal management of migration that have occurred in Russia since 2015, but instead to capture a particular moment of bureaucratic intensification in the period between 2010 and 2015, when the need to synchronize disjunctive temporal demands as a pre-condition for creating a documented self became a preoccupying concern of my informants.²

The majority of the fifty or so Batken men and women whom I came to know most closely during fieldwork lived, like other migrant workers from Kyrgyzstan, in a legal and administrative grey zone. Most, though by

no means all, entered Russia legally, acquiring a migration card at their port of entry and taking advantage of a visa-free regime between the two states to register as temporary visitors. Most acquired some form of temporary residence registration document, though typically not for the address at which they actually lived and often not for the full period of *de facto* work or residence. Most, moreover, worked ‘off the books’, either in work that was formally unrecognized and legally uncontracted (typically in market trade, construction, and catering), or in roles in which someone else, typically a Russian citizen, was the notional employee, with wages signed for under another’s name (and a cut often taken by an intermediary ‘contractor’ between the official and *de facto* salary). Others held ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ jobs simultaneously, supplementing regular hours in the former with a second, undocumented role, often using the borrowed passport of a friend or relative in situations where their own registration status was insecure or their work permit no longer ‘in date’. Social networks rooted in kinship and co-residency were crucial to the search for work and reliable accommodation. Jobs were often passed on to an acquaintance when the original holder returned to Kyrgyzstan at the end of a period of work. Roles that included opportunities for lucrative side-earnings (such as the janitor of an apartment block who could rent out the block’s cellar-space for storage or off-the-books accommodation) were often informally ‘sold’ to other members of one’s social network (Reeves 2013).

The stratification of the Russian labour market, and the place of migrant workers within that system, have been the subject of a number of critical analyses, including by rights monitoring organizations committed to curtailing abuse of irregular workers (Human Rights Watch 2009; Tyuryukanova 2006). Here, rather than reiterate

such findings, I seek only to note that for most of my Kyrgyz acquaintances, as for other non-citizens from the C.I.S during my period of research, migrant life was typically experienced as insecure in a triple sense.

Economically, much work was subject to the vagaries of construction sector boom and bust, and the non-contractual and typically non-codified verbal promise of wages for work. Verbal contracts were trust-based and precarious, often enforced through threat of (violent) sanction in the case of non-payment of wages (see also Urinboyev and Polese 2016). Administratively, too, life was full of uncertainty. A majority of my informants lived in a condition of semi-legality, where the qualification of indeterminacy of their status was constituted through the vagaries of non-contractual work and the dependence of informal brokers to obtain putatively ‘clean’ (i.e. authentic) registration documents and work permits (Reeves 2013a). While relatively few of my informants were deported, in the sense of forcibly removed from the territory of the state, a significant number found themselves subject to a so-called ‘re-entry’ ban for one or another administrative violation, including otherwise trivial offences such as traffic violations or late payments (Kubal 2016; 2017; Reeves 2016). This predicament meant that few migrants sought official redress in situations of non- or under-payment; or unfair dismissal or eviction.

These two dimensions meant that life was also experienced as insecure in a third sense. The chronic possibility that one might find oneself retroactively subject to a ban on re-entry also rendered the *future* fragile and precarious. The capacity to plan, to predict, to anticipate—even to imagine a clear horizon of possibility ‘here’, ‘there’, or in-between—was compromised by the awareness that one might, unwittingly, already be in violation of administrative regulations: that one might find oneself having failed the test

of time and already be subject to a prohibition on re-entry. In such a situation the categories ‘undocumented’ or ‘sans-papiers’, often preferred by scholars as a non-pejorative alternative to ‘illegal’ to describe migrant workers whose presence or labour is formally unrecognized, is inadequate to capture the full range of migrants’ documentary experiences and accompanying subjective states. Most of my acquaintances were less ‘un’-documented than hyper-documented, often requiring multiple documents to codify different aspects of one’s existence to diverse constituencies. Most, moreover, were eager to regularize their situation. The chase for getting papers ‘right’ was thus a consuming aspect of urban life.

Partly for this reason, the work of documentary legibility also became a major part of my own ethnographic fieldwork. While I conducted extensive interviews on work life and spent much of my time during fieldwork learning the routines of two multi-tenant dormitory apartments that were sub-let to tenants from southern Kyrgyzstan, much of my participant observation occurred in the ‘in-between’ time between work and home, often accompanying acquaintances after work or on days off as they carried out errands, travelled the metro, or simply waited for documents that had been acquired with the assistance of an informal intermediary (*posrednik*). Many of my acquaintances worked so-called 2/2 shifts: 2 days of 12 hours’ work followed by 2 days off. One of my primary fieldwork roles was that of companion and co-traveller during the ‘off’ days. It was this experience of accompanying acquaintances as they collected or deposited documents and as they stood in line for papers or the *talons* (paper or plastic tokens) that would enable one to queue for medical examinations, as they crossed Moscow and its environs by metro, bus, and mini-bus (*marshrutka*) that

first drew my attention to the intense, effortful, and socially-complex work of generating a documented self.

I return to the labour of queuing below. I will first sketch out a temporal analytics of migrant illegalization by delineating three ways in which time is implicated in the making and unmaking of a legally legible self.

TEMPORALISING MIGRANT ‘ILLEGALITY’

In contemporary migration regimes, time is fundamentally implicated in the *codification of entitlement*. Time is intrinsic to the ways that various categories of migrants are conceived within law and policy, such as ‘temporary worker’ schemes, ‘guest worker’ visas, or resettlement programs. Understandings of prospective temporariness or permanence also shape expectations of deservingness and constrain the rights that non-citizens are able to claim within a polity. Certain guest-worker schemes, for instance, are defined not just by specific parameters of age and citizenship, but by the codification of ‘temporariness’ through prohibitions on sexual relations and/or marriage in the country of temporary residence, or through prohibitions upon return to the host country after a period (e.g. Chin 2003). In other cases, ‘temporariness’ is tied to the durability or contingency of a particular employer’s needs, or to the demands of ‘just-in-time’ production (Chu 2016).

Time is also implicated in the juridical and *socio-political production of legal legibility*. To remain ‘documented’ and formally non-deportable may require amassing a certain package of documents in a certain sequence within certain temporal parameters. Documenting one’s entitlement to permanent residence, for instance, may require being able to document

retrospectively one's presence through time, one's work contributions or tax payments, sometimes going back several decades. In many migration regimes, including the Russian one, such temporal constraints result in certain paradoxical outcomes: the need, for instance, to fabricate a (fictional) 'exit' from the country every few months in order to re-establish one's status as a new arrival; the need to obtain a fake medical certificate in order to produce a 'clean' (i.e. authentic) work permit within specified time constraints; or the accumulation of fake stamps in order to document putative long-term residence in a given apartment so as to be able to apply for permanent residence.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, such systems of bureaucratic legibility also generate their own economies of mediation and fabrication. Besides the vast private profits that are made from the 'detention estate' in systems of commercialized detention and deportation management (Andersson 2014: 806), the bureaucratic production of migrant 'illegality' also creates the conditions for a proliferation in informal payments to street-level bureaucrats. In the Russian context, Vladimir Malakhov has argued that such inconsistencies should be understood, not as the mere 'teething problems' of a migration regime that is still in formation, but as intrinsic to the very logic of the migration system that systematically reproduces legal loopholes. 'It would not be an overstatement', Malakhov asserts, 'to claim that corruption is the main factor determining current immigration politics in Russia' (2014: 1075).

Perhaps most significantly, time and its appropriation are implicated in *techniques of subjectification*: in marking and manifesting who is subordinate to whom through the differential distribution of time. This is the dimension that ethnography is uniquely well-placed to explore, given its attentiveness to the experiential

dimensions of social life. It is striking, then, that while anthropologists have often noted the forms of chronic waiting to which marginalized people are subjected in order to realize their life projects (Jeffrey 2010; Elliott 2016), there have, as Rotter (2016: 81) notes, been relatively few studies that have treated waiting as an object of analysis in its own right. Those that do tend to focus on waiting as a technique of power: a 'political artefact', as Ozolina-Fitzgerald (2016) puts it in her study of a Latvian unemployment office, that is 'a key mechanism of neo-liberal biopolitics'. In one of the few detailed ethnographies of what people do *when* they wait, Javier Auyero (2012) presents what he calls a 'tempography of domination', arguing that domination works 'through yielding to the power of others; and it is experienced as a waiting time: waiting hopefully and then frustratedly for others to make decisions, and in effect surrendering to the authority of others'.

Within anthropological studies of migration, 'waiting' has primarily been explored from two perspectives: the waiting of the 'left behind', a term that highlights the apparent passivity of the non-migrant who waits (for remittances, for news, for the return of a loved one), or the waiting of those in legal limbo, whose future security is contingent upon the determination of their legal or documentary status. While anthropologists have recently come to question the figure of the 'left behind' as a passive actor who merely 'sits and waits', highlighting the intense activity that is required to sustain life in contexts of family absence (Aitieva 2015; Ibañez-Tirado 2019; Reeves 2011), studies of waiting among migrants themselves have tended, by contrast, to highlight the 'emptiness' or evacuation of waiting-time in contexts of legal indeterminacy.

Much of this second body of scholarship has focused on sites of physical confinement

such as holding camps, detention centers, and removal facilities (Hasselberg 2016; Andersson 2014; De Genova 2016; Griffiths 2014) and as such has drawn attention to the *suspension* of time in conditions of administrative indeterminacy. Hasselberg (2016: 103) writes of her informants' anxieties about time itself being felt to 'stand still' when awaiting legal determinations in their cases. Brekke (2010) describes 'life on hold' and recounts his informant's sense of 'treading water' to capture the sense of directionless time in the Swedish asylum system. Writing of the experiences of refused asylum seekers in the UK, Griffiths (2014: 1995) describes the 'sticky, slow time' waiting for the bureaucracy to run its course: a 'stickiness' magnified by the impossibility of working legally as a 'failed' asylum seeker, and thus 'out of time' with the rest of the population. In the US, Coutin (2005) describes undocumented Salvadorians as experiencing a time of social 'non-existence'.

Such accounts, and the metaphors of standstill, pause, or rupture on which they hinge, bring an important critical perspective to the experience of waiting as a mode of encounter with contemporary migration regimes premised upon categorical subordination through the abrogation of one's present and the foreclosure of one's future. In their focus on waiting as a suspension of forward movement they serve as a useful corrective to accounts of contemporary social navigation focused on acceleration, speed, and the experiential insufficiency of time (Virilio 2005). They illuminate how the apparent unboundedness of time—the time of 'infinite detention'—can be experienced as viscerally oppressive when the capacity to express agency over one's future is undermined (Bendixsen and Hylland Eriksen 2018; see also Harms 2013: 346).

In evoking the 'emptiness' of waiting time,

however, there is a risk that such accounts downplay the intensity, sometimes even the great *urgency*, of activity that can fill such spaces of indeterminacy: the social and material work of conjuring a meaningful future that can consume the process of waiting *for* something to happen or bringing a future plan into being, the frenetic labour of gathering papers, the rush to make it to the first train of the day so as to have the chance to be among those admitted to join that day's queue. Among my informants it was precisely such vectoral metaphors that surrounded the discussion of waiting. In Moscow I was often told that not just work, but life itself, had to be conducted 'in a running mode' (Kyrgyz: *churkap jashysh kerek*). The migrants who were most admired among my Kyrgyz acquaintances were those who were 'sharp' (Russian: *shustryi* or Kyrgyz: *tyng*): those who navigated the metro quickly, those who walked at the pace of the Moscow pedestrian, those who found shortcuts, literal and metaphorical, to juggle multiple jobs simultaneously. Police officers, I was told, identified migrants for spot checks on the basis, first of all, of their walking pace and the state of their shoes. Both had to be in order. At the heart of this work of social navigation lay mastering the art of the queue.

OCCUPYING THE QUEUE

Queues are profoundly physical things: they register on the body, on the senses, on the emotions. In Moscow winters, they register in the breath, the fingers, the toes, the eyebrows, the freezing hairs inside the nose. But they are intensely social spaces, too. In both Russian and the Kyrgyz vernacular (which typically uses a calque of the Russian for 'queue' rather than the literary *kezek*), one speaks of 'occupying' or 'engaging' the queue, *zaniat' ochered'*. Occupying the queue involves 'before' an intensely social

process of negotiation (who is after whom?), assertion (I am after him!) and surveillance (why is she jumping the queue?). It entails claiming one's place pro-actively. Failing adequately to announce one's membership in the queue ('I'm after you', 'I'm the last one here'), accompanied by a glance to the person in front, is to risk having one's place usurped by the previous 'last person' slipping people in front. Protestations of queue-jumping are liable to be met with the indignant response: 'but you didn't occupy your place!' (*a vy-to ne zaniiali vashe mesto!*) To 'occupy' or to 'engage' a queue (the same verb would be used to indicate that one 'engages' in sport or music or work) implies, then, a process of accommodation and adaptation through which one reckons with the queue as an active, social being; it is to recognize it as a social form and to claim one's membership within it.

For my acquaintances seeking to regularize their situation, navigating the city required encountering the queue as a living, breathing, many-headed, socio-material *thing*. One becomes part of it, one reproduces it through one's own bodily submission. Its effects are visceral. Occupying in this sense requires more than patience; it requires a commitment actively to work the queue, knowing when to engage in banter, when to share a joke or a crucial piece of information, when to assert one's primacy through reprimands, gestures, or physical force and when, simply, to ignore the surrounding emotion and instead scroll through messages or images on one's phone. Queues are profoundly relational, and techniques of queueing are varied and locally specific. My own first experience of navigating (or rather, failing to navigate) the post-Soviet queue—in Bishkek's central telegraph office in August 2000, on the one day in the month when payments for domestic telephone connections were accepted in the cavernous *raschetnyi tsentr* (billing centre)—is engrained

on my memory precisely because I didn't have the embodied knowledge of what queueing *here* entailed. Unused to the work of asserting one's queue-membership, and assuming that to stand silently at the end of a pre-formed line was sufficient, I found myself repeatedly jostled to the back of the queue by feisty grandmothers who had no qualms about displacing a novice who had failed to assert her presence in the locally-recognized manner. That month I never did manage to pay my telephone bill.

Queues, then, are intensely social spaces. But there is something more. For the 'queue', like its counter-part, the 'waiting list', is also a particular technology of arbitration; a tool for allocation of public goods that are scarce or in demand, one that has a distinctive and notorious history within the Soviet economy of shortages (see, e.g. Bogdanov 2012; Fitzpatrick 2000). In his satire on late Soviet society, *The Queue*, Vladimir Sorokin's (1985) queueing characters ask not 'what are people buying today?' but 'what are they giving us today?' In the classic Soviet queue for shortage goods, people would come and go from queues with their string-bag, their 'just-in-case' bag (*avoska*), saving one another's place, in the hope that one or other of them proved fruitful. Such learned habits of queue-work have cognates in many of the habits of 'occupying' that we find today, from the collective policing of queue-jumpers to the holding of places for friends, to the requirement to announce one's joining a queue, to the circulating of written lists to allow people to attend multiple lines simultaneously.

In late Soviet society, the shortage goods were typically imported or so-called 'deficit' products, such as jeans or tins of coffee. The joke went that one first occupied the queue and *then* asked 'what are they giving out here?' (*a chto zdes' daiut?*)—the 'giving' here reflecting that the limiting factor in obtaining the item in question

was less how much money one had than how successfully one worked one's connections. During the period of my research, the 'shortage good' for migrant workers from visa-free states was legality itself, as demand for legal work permits in cities such as Moscow drastically exceeded the annual (politically-determined) quota allocation.

In part this was a product of the deliberate, strategic manipulation of a quota that was determined by political goals rather than a real reflection of labour market needs (see Schenk 2013, 2018). There would always be more people requiring work permits than there were permits to be given; only the 'sharp' (Kyrgyz: *tyng*), I was told, might manage to get hold of one in time. In part, however, it stemmed from the disjunctive tempi of legalization: the fact that one had to regularize within particular time-constraints for one document (such as a registration document or migration card) successfully to authorize another (cf. Humphrey 2002: 26). In this situation, much of the anxiety that concerned obtaining a work permit (or, after changes in the legislation, a *patent* or license to undertake individual entrepreneurial activity) centered on the time-boundedness of each document's authorizing capacity and the herculean challenge of synchronizing 'legal time' with the demands of shift-work and domestic responsibilities. 'Illegality' often arose, not so much from deliberate concealment or intentional over-staying as from the mundane obstacles faced with amassing the required packet of sequentially authorising documents within the days prescribed by law. One could all too easily fail the test of time, finding oneself in administrative violation (and hence subject to a five-year prohibition on re-entry) for failing either the documentary sequence, or the time limit for regularization, or for presenting as substantiation documents that proved to

be fakes (Russian: *falshivye* or *poddel'nye*). At different times over the last decade, amassing those documents required blood samples and medical tests, language exams and fingerprint scans; each entailing a queue, and sometimes requiring a queue to get the *talon*, the token, that allows one to enter the real, so-called 'living' queue (*zhivaia ochered'*) on a given day.

These political logics have become part of the 'taken-for-granted' of migrant life: the taken-for-granted that prompted thirty-year old Kyial, one of my informants whose document-chase I followed, to remark that he 'felt it *here*', gesturing to the back of his neck, when a policeman called him over for a check on documents that might mark him as unwittingly 'illegal'. The Russian migration bureaucracy is visceral, I suggest, because migrant workers come to embody these contradictions as part of the very understanding of how 'the system' works, in ways that blur boundaries between 'legal' and 'illegal' residence in the city.

To illustrate, I turn to one of the central domains for the administrative distribution of legality and one of the central domains where the 'soul-snatching' (*jantalashyp*) mode of life registered in the bones: the queue to enter the Federal Migration Service offices in Bibirevo district, Moscow.

WORKING THE QUEUE IN BIBIREVO

Bibirevo district, in the far north of Moscow, is an unassuming sort of place. A working-class 'dormitory district' (*spal'nyi raion*) just inside Moscow's outer ring-road, it consists of clusters of nine-storey socialist era apartment blocks, dotted amongst which are two-storey administrative buildings, parks and post-Soviet plate-glass trading centers. Like other micro-districts conceived and built in the era

of planned housing, the apartment buildings, public services and administrative offices alike are so-called '*tipovye*' constructions: they follow a series (*seriia*) or pattern, such that the period in which the dormitory district was cleared from the woodland at Moscow's outer edges can be gleaned from the height, shape, and form of apartment buildings and their arrangement in space. Bibirevo was a relatively late micro-district within the socialist development of Moscow, with most of the mass housing here dating from the 1960s to 1980s.

In the early 2010s, Bibirevo became synonymous with a deep strain of anti-migrant sentiment from which opposition leaders capitalized (Antoshkina 2013; Dikov 2013). At the center of this contention was one of the *tipovye* two-storey buildings—a former kindergarten in the form of a modified letter H—which served between 2005 and 2015 as the office of migration regulation of the Moscow branch of the Administration of the Federal Migration Service (the *Upravlenie Federal'noi Migratsionnoi Sluzhby*, known colloquially as the FMS). During my period of fieldwork this was the only building in which migrant workers in Moscow from visa-free states could receive the work permit (*razreshenie na rabotu*) that would allow them to be employed legally in Russia. From Kyial's home in Teplyi Stan district, located at the other extreme of the Moscow ring-road, the journey by public transport would take over two and a half hours. To have any chance of making the queue, he would need to be seated in the front carriage of the first underground train of the day, followed by a bus and a sprint at the other end.

'Queue', like 'line' and their Russian equivalent, *ochered'*, is something of a misnomer to describe the scene outside the FMS offices, since all three terms imply an ordered sequence of turn-taking. The physical architecture of

the courtyard—and, indeed, the mode of administration through selective legalization—meant that the set-up here was rather a free-for-all of a pushing, jostling and heaving as the sheer volume of bodies waiting to get inside was funneled sequentially against the perimeter fence, an inner metal tunnel, and the building's front door. At times the pressure of bodies pushed up against the door meant that the door itself could not be opened, and the message would be shouted back through the queue to step back. Most of the people standing in line were under the age of 40; some queued for other people, taking a small payment in return. Many seemed practiced at it, or, at least, resigned to the reality that waiting in line here would require hours pressed up against other bodies, and often other coats, hats and winter boots too. This was a highly gendered space, as women tended to travel accompanied by a male relative or acquaintance with whom they would switch in and out of the queue. Since the Bibirevo office catered to citizens from visa-free states subject to a so-called 'simplified procedure' of legalization from the CIS, the majority of those queuing were visible migrants from the states of Central Asia, with (in 2013, at least), smaller numbers of Moldovans and Ukrainians. The racialization of this space was not lost on my acquaintances: this was, euphemistically, the place where the *chernye*, the blacks, went to get their documents.

The queue as spectacle was exaggerated by the architecture of enforced waiting. The FMS offices were over-looked by a cluster of apartment buildings and surrounded by a high perimeter fence topped with barbed wire and patrolled by private security guards and—at least on some occasions—members of the Russian special forces, the OMON. This scene of intense securitization magnified the sense that this was a space marked, physically and

socially, as apart from the non-descript suburban center that surrounded it. In 2014, the last time Kyial applied for his documents there, emotions were running high. Local residents were upset that their local kindergartens had been sold off and repurposed, and angry that the local infrastructure was unable to cope with the daily influx of temporary visitors who often ended up waiting in the entrance-ways of residential buildings to shelter from the cold, or darting into local cafés only to use the bathroom. By the middle of 2014, local media in Moscow were featuring reports of angry residents promising that, were the FMS center not relocated, they would ‘create another Biryulovo’—a reference to a tragic escalation of violence against non-Russian migrants in another of Moscow’s districts, after a video of a Russian man being stabbed by a so-called ‘southerner’ (a euphemism for dark-skinned non-Russians in Moscow) circulated on the internet (KPRF 2014).

Until 2015, when various services were centralized in a huge purpose-built warehouse in Sakharovo, 80 kilometers and 2 and half hours south of Moscow, Bibirevo was a place associated among my acquaintances with hopes, frustrations, and the slow, humiliating uncertainty of administrative arbitration: the place, as one of Kyial’s house-mates put it, where you feel through the crush of bodies on bodies just how little the Russian authorities want you there. It was in the Bibirevo center that you would go to deposit documents and, a few days later, collect the plastic, credit-card sized *razreshenie na rabotu*, the work permit stamped with the seal of the FMS.

The heightened emotion no doubt had to do with the drawn-out humiliation of a visit here, one that required hours squeezed together in a human mass, in broiling heat or bitter cold, pressed together with an intensity that would catch the breath and leave fingers

and toes liable to be stepped on crushed. But it also derived from the fact that a visit here was typically the last and decisive stage to obtain a work permit that often began weeks or months earlier: one that could, and often did, end in failure, particularly if some of the authorizing documents on which this plastic card depended were deemed to be fakes.

In the first half of the 2010s, the formal sequence for obtaining the *razreshenie* among ‘visa-free’ non-citizens required first obtaining three separate medical attestations of good-health, each requiring its own documentary evidence (*spravka*) and, usually, its own queue. The first was a confirmation that one was free of HIV/AIDs and other sexually transmitted diseases, including syphilis. Such a confirmation could be obtained for 2000 rubles from a so-called *kozhno-venerologicheskii dispanser* or *kozhven* for short, a state-run clinic for dermatological and venereal diseases. This was followed by a fluorological x-ray examination of the lungs (*fluorografiia*), a urine test and a further blood test confirming freedom from tuberculosis. The TB exams were followed by a blood test from a *narkologicheskii dispanser* (narcological dispensary) confirming that one was not drug dependent, followed by a finger print scan at a special dactiloscopia center. This was a new innovation in 2013 in an attempt to stem the number of fake documents and the possibility that migrants might be using one another’s documents to apply for work under a fictional identity. Among my acquaintances there was considerable discussion as to whether the necessary certificates or *spravki*—each of which cost a few thousand rubles—had to be obtained from a *particular* municipal clinic that could confirm one’s freedom from illness with the state’s own seal, or whether it could and should be obtained in a way that entailed less queuing but more cost, from a private clinic.

Could a commercial stamp, in other words, do the same work of authorization as a state-run dispensary? And anyway, when fake documents abound, would this difference make a difference?

Each of these tests and registrations took place in a different building, usually each in a different part of town. Due to limited capacity, such clinics would often admit the first twenty or fifty people in a queue at the start of the day and process only those cases on a given day. Such systems of *de facto* arbitration gave a particular quality to the queue, most of which formed first outside the relevant administrative building long before its scheduled opening hours. Although there would also be a queue *inside* a building, the critical issue was making it inside so as to be registered (*zapisan*) for the indoor queue. Sometimes this was facilitated by a person who took it upon themselves to produce a list (*spisok*) to which names and numbers were added, allowing those queuing outside the building to step aside from the line for periods, returning back to their earlier spot minutes or hours later.

Sometimes the outdoor queue was facilitated by a system of improvised paper or printed paper slips (*talony*) indicating a number in a queue, or simply the right to be admitted inside so as to form the queue for the given test or examination. On arriving at a given building, the critical question was knowing how many people were in front of you: a queue of 20 people and you would have a chance of getting in that day, more than 50 and you might be better off returning with an earlier start the following day. It was also important to know how many people were having their place 'held' by someone else. When arriving it was always imperative first to ask who here was the last in the queue (Russian: *kto poslednyi?*—'who is the last in line?') and then to assert to this person (and also for public confirmation) that 'I, then, am after you' (*ya za vami*).

The visit to Bibirevo was the last of this sequence of queues. Without a work permit not just one's labour status but one's residential status could be invalidated, since without a work permit, one remained merely a 'temporary visitor' rather than a prospective resident and thus obliged to leave the country within 90 days or be in violation of one's conditions of entry. The stakes of success were thus high. By 6.30 in the morning, the green metal perimeter fence already had a queue of people standing outside. When the perimeter gate was opened, at 8am, the crowd of queue-hopefuls would regroup inside the building courtyard, this time pressed up against the *reshchetka*, a metal tunnel (often referred to colloquially as the 'monkey-cage'), the *obeziannik*, that served as the conduit for channeling the huge mass of people hoping to make it inside the FMS building. It was in the *reshchetka* that queuing was at its most visceral. To have a chance to get inside the building, one had to make it inside the 'cage'. The very slim could slip through the metal bars; the very audacious climbed up on top of the plastic sheeting surrounding the cage and hauled themselves down into the mass of bodies below. Mobile phone footage that circulated among my acquaintances captured scenes in deep winter when bodies were literally passed, horizontally, towards the front of the queue, crowd-surfing style.

At different times during the many-hour wait inside the *reshchetka* the mood was subdued, especially when the combination of exhaustion and extreme cold left little desire or capacity to do anything other than defend one's spot aggressively. At other times the enforced waiting produced its own forms of sociality, as information was shared and signs interpreted by those who had more experience in navigating a particular institution ('a light has gone on, they'll be opening up soon', 'try to get to

avoid window 3, she's a bureaucratic job's-worth'). Drawing on research with Kyrgyz migrants in Yakutsk, where temperatures regularly reach the low -30s centigrade, Medina Aitieva (nd) describes an informal system outside the local FMS branch in which the women waiting in line (5 out of a total of over 150 who had been registered on the list by 9am on the day that she describes) were permitted by the men in the queue to move up to the front of the line so as to avoid getting sick from the cold. She also describes how this informal gesture of solidarity was over-ruled by migration service officials in retaliation at an apparent scam in which some people at the front of the queue had been 'selling' their place to those further back. Both of these moments—the sudden generosity towards strangers waiting in the cold, and the arbitrary refusal to accede their small gesture of care—speak to the dynamic of the queue: a place, potentially, of both ruthless self-preservation and of spontaneous human kindness.

In the end, the final 'indoor' queue at Bibirevo, if one made it inside, was surprisingly short. The final wait, at a window corresponding with one's surname, consisted of either a plastic card being extracted from a long card catalogue, or a rebuff: that the permit isn't yet ready; or that one of the authorizing documents had failed to do its work and the permit could not be issued. The determination was short and, given the intense pressure of the outdoor queue, almost cruelly indifferent. 'Here's your card' 'Come back tomorrow', or, most callously of all, a shutter falling and a wooden sign being propped up in the window, announcing simply 'break-time' (*pereryv*). Either way, the culmination of the queue seemed something of anti-climax. Janybek, who, at 37, had finally sought to obtain a work permit after years working without documentation, entering and

exiting the country as a temporary visitor, sighed as he flicked his new, pink *razreshenie* between his fingers on the metro home after the best part of a day standing in line. 'All this for a piece of plastic', he said, before quizzing me on the possibilities for work as a Kyrgyzstani citizen in the UK. 'Is this how other countries do it too?'

SKIPPING THE QUEUE

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the drain on time and resources that standing in line entailed, there emerged a plethora of 'fixes' for those who had the resources and contacts to mobilize them. One of the older, better-established migrants in the Batken community, known affectionately as 'two-sim-card' Kairat for his savvy, his contacts, and his endless working of an extensive social network, had developed a side-line in obtaining so-called 'clean' registration documents, and knew companies that sold work permits for a mark-up of 200 to 300 percent after they, in turn, had 'bought' a particular portion of quota positions from the Federal Migration Service. Since any company could apply for a portion of the official FMS quota, a number of companies simply bought more quota-places than they could possibly need, selling them on to subsidiary companies at considerable profit. In 2010, for instance, the official annual quota for permits to work in Moscow city expired in April. Anyone applying for a work permit after this time would have to go through such an intermediary company and hope that the resultant work permit was not a fake.

Others used fabricated medical certificates to speed up the process of obtaining a 'clean' work permit, bypassing the lengthy wait for blood tests and x-rays. Others, still, avoided the whole attempt to obtain a work permit by exiting and entering Russia every three months, crossing the Ukrainian (and later,

the Kazakh) border to obtain the stamps that would certify one's presence as a new arrival. Each of these strategies entailed its own risks and uncertainties, however. A work permit obtained through a commercial company, for instance, might look authentic but prove to be counterfeit when checked against the databases of the Federal Migration Service. The wait that was entailed when working through a series of opaque intermediary companies might mean that you end up with a work permit only to find that you have to repeat the whole process, at great expense, just a few months later. And entering and exiting the country, while permitted for any citizen of a visa-free state, meant that you were necessarily working illegally, since only with a work permit or *patent* could you formally document the entitlement to work.

All of this was common knowledge to my informants. Adilet, a former employee of the regional Ministry of Emergency Situations, an accountant by training who now worked as a brigade-leader on a peri-urban construction site, expressed his exasperation at being forced to work illegally because he had been unable to secure a work permit through a commercial firm. You need a 'trustworthy person', a *taanygan kisbi*, he explained, and as a relatively new arrival, albeit one with plenty of cultural capital, he had failed to mobilize the necessary networks in time to work legally. Recalling his exasperation at trying to reason with the Federal Migration Service in 2010, he recounted, with exasperation: 'I told them: I want to pay this money, the 8,000 rubles. Let me give you that money! Because I know that you have to pay income tax, I know that. *I was an accountant!*'

CONCLUSION: BEYOND EMPTY WAITING

Scholars of post-Soviet migration have convincingly pointed to the shortage of legal labour that subtends the Russian migration regime (Malakhov 2014; Schenk 2018). The political logics underlying this situation have a distinctive history within the Russian Federation, and have been instrumental in constituting migrant labour from the so-called 'near abroad' as a highly vulnerable and tractable source of labour power (Buckley 1995). The queue—whether the 'living queue' outside the Federal Migration Service offices, or the invisible lists of quotas and allocations that legalize some people's labour but renders others', seemingly arbitrarily, unrecognized—was, during my period of research, an intrinsic aspect of this broader migration regime. In a situation of distributed legality, it is the queue that determines the scope and dimensions of in- and exclusion within the polity. Its arbitrariness is intrinsic to its political modality: it is this that keeps all migrant workers in the existential 'running mode', never entirely sure whether they might always-already be in violation of some rule.

Viewed ethnographically, however, a queue isn't *just* a technology of allocation, or a tool of social control. It is also a particular kind of social space, with particular rules, particular ways of behaving, particular practices of engagement. 'Occupying' the queue requires conceding to those practices and learning those modes of behavior. But it also entails a claiming of place, the voicing of a *demand*: to be seen, to be heard, to be registered and acknowledged by a state that would deny one's legal legibility. It is thus a site of 'lateral agency' in Berlant's (2007) sense. Indeed, in moments of exasperation—when the shutters came down, literally or metaphorically,

in one's face—it was striking how much the demand to be seen was at the fore. 'Do I exist?' 'Am I invisible?' the question would go up. Or simply the assertion: 'I am not going away.'

The approach that I have sought to develop here, attuned to the intensity of experience and the forms of action that coalesce in settings where nothing very much seems to happen, can help us to nuance studies of migration policy in Russia that have tended to focus on its (necro-) political logics rather than the ways in which such logics are navigated, discussed, reasoned about, negotiated, and sometimes, physically resisted. In conditions of administrative and legal exception, crafting a livable future becomes a domain of determined action to synchronize disjunctive temporal regimes. A focus on the work of occupying the queue—as relational activity and as a mode of visceral encounter with the state bureaucracy—can provide a lens for attending, ethnographically, to the intensely social action of rending oneself legally legible, the embodied work of waiting.

A focus on occupying the queue is also of significance more generally, for anthropology's recent 'temporal turn'. I noted at the start of this article that anthropology studies of 'modern time' have engaged only tangentially with the experience of legal indeterminacy in contexts of migration, just as migration studies have only recently begun to foreground time and its regulation as foundational to the migrant experience. A focus on temporality in migration trajectories, as Baas and Yeoh (2019) note in the introduction to a recent Special Issue, 'shows us that migration itself is not necessarily always about trans/national mobility but often also about not moving at all' (2019: 162). This recent scholarship has foregrounded time as a tool of discipline and its regulation as a defining feature of modernity. It has drawn attention to waiting as a form of suspension: to legal limbo as a form

of 'stuckness', to bureaucratic deadlines as constituting a form of temporal trap.

Such traps were topics of frequent commentary by my informants, who often lamented the absurdity of having to regularize their legal status within near-impossible time constraints. Migrant 'illegality', they showed me, emerges at the intersection of competing tempi of labour, life and law: it is not just getting together the requisite documents that is difficult, but doing so *in time* and within the constraints of shift-work or domestic service grounded in long hours, long commutes, compulsory overtime, and unpredictable schedules. But it is also for this very reason that the capacity to synchronize schedules, demands, energies, bodies, papers, and data emerges as itself a particular kind of skill: a labour of attention and coordination. Successfully occupying the queue entailed a dense interplay between suspension and action, indeterminacy and urgency, playfulness and seriousness. It required speed as well as the capacity to slow oneself right down; it demanded knowing when to endure silently and when to demand one's turn.

Such mastery was less about 'tricking' time (Morosanu and Ringel 2016; Ringel 2016)—the sense that one might be able to 'outmaneuver, overcome or manipulate' temporal constraints (Bear 2016: 495–496)—than a kind of deep attentiveness to those disjunctive regimes, sufficient to suture them together, fleetingly, for the purpose of making life here endure. It is in this respect, I suggest, that the 'existentially sensitive' approach articulated by Lems and Tošić in their introduction, and explored by all of the contributors to this Special Issue, can contribute to a more differentiated temporal turn within contemporary anthropological debate. Ethnographic attention to what goes on in the work of waiting reveals that the embodied labours of synchronization are not

about a super-human ‘overcoming’ of temporal constraint; nor are they about a resigned acquiescence to legal-bureaucratic demands that are not of one’s making. The ethics at stake here is one of maintenance, not of refusal or over-turning. Yet it is precisely in this space of keeping-things-going that we can locate temporal agency. In the condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life, Berlant (2007: 759) reminds us, ‘agency can be an activity of maintenance, not making; fantasy, without grandiosity; sentience, without full intentionality; inconsistency, without shattering’. This is a good description of the work of waiting. Occupying the queue involves motion *and* stasis; acquiescence and demand. The dialectical relationship between the two comes into focus when we foreground the question of what people actually do when and while they wait. It is precisely such seemingly unremarkable action—the little tactics of occupying the queue—that draws into focus the transformative labour of making present forms endure.

NOTES

- 1 I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing this work to my attention.
- 2 In 2015, when Kyrgyzstan joined the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU), the requirements for documenting work changed markedly, in that Kyrgyz citizens would be able to apply for work on an equal basis with other citizens of the ECU. It was also in 2015 that the Russian government sought a dramatic overhaul of the management of migration through the opening of so-called ‘polyfunctional migration centres’ that would draw together previously dispersed and spatially distributed documentary activities. The impact of such changes on the modes through which the Russian migration bureaucracy are encountered deserve separate ethnographic study and are beyond the scope of this essay, though it is worth noting that both of these changes—the opening

of extra-urban migration centres, and Kyrgyzstan’s membership of the ECU, have significantly impacted the experience of waiting work for Kyrgyzstani (and other Central Asian) migrant workers. This essay seeks to capture a specific moment and the forms of temporal practice that it elicited rather than to make a claim about the present state of affairs at the time of writing. It is for this reason that I cast my ethnography in the past tense.

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