

war, measured as the number of C(b)s brought back into commission, is significant: by this time, 126,999 C(b)s had been made habitable, compared with 101,275 new dwellings. Together, these two parts of the housing programme actually bettered the target announced in the White Paper in March 1945 (228,274, against a target of 200,000). Moreover, this was achieved while 727,000 less badly damaged houses were being repaired to permanent standards. If we consider the difficulties that stood in the way, the shortages of manpower and materials, the run-down state of the economy, and the general exhaustion after six years of war, can we not afford to be more generous in our assessment of the post-war housing achievement both nationally and in London?

JOE MORAN* *Liverpool John Moores University*

Queuing up in Post-War Britain

Abstract

This article traces a history of the queue in post-war Britain, both in relation to its changing social organization and its shifting symbolism. In the immediate post-war period, with the continuation of rationing and shortages, the queue was exploited for its political capital by Conservative politicians like Winston Churchill, who equated queuing with meddling socialism. As queuing ceased to be an explicitly political issue in the 1950s and 1960s, it began to be linked implicitly with the issue of national 'decline', which dominated political discussion and social commentary from the late 1950s onwards. The queues in banks and post offices, in particular, were seen as a symptom of the 'British disease' of badly trained, poorly motivated employees and mediocre management. In the 1970s and 1980s, the 'dole queue' also became part of a politicized mythology of decline, although much of its imagery was borrowed from the 1930s. In the Thatcher era, queuing was increasingly transformed by queue management theories and technologies. Being primarily market-led, this queuing revolution was an uneven phenomenon. In low-status public spaces, such as bus stops, people were still left to improvise their own queue discipline; and organizations like banks used queueless services to focus on valued clientele. The changing nature of the queue thus reveals much about the relationship between quotidian routine, politics, and the market in the post-war era.

Introduction

At the end of the Second World War, a number of writers on the English character turned their attention to queuing. In his essay 'The English People' (1944), George Orwell envisaged an imaginary foreign observer who would be struck 'by the orderly behaviour of English crowds, the lack of pushing and quarrelling, the willingness

* j.moran@livjm.ac.uk

to form queues'.¹ The Hungarian émigré, George Mikes, claimed in *How to be an Alien* (1946) that 'an Englishman, even if he is alone, forms an orderly queue of one'. Queuing, he claimed, was 'the national passion of an otherwise dispassionate race', the daily embodiment of our eternal sense of fairness and civility.² Writing a year later, the historian Ernest Barker commended the English urban crowd for its

good sense, a species of self-discipline and a tactic of 'fitting in' neatly on a little space... queues will form, and will show some sense of discipline and tactics; there will be some bad manners and a little thrusting; but the institution (for the queue is of that order) will be made to work.³

For all these writers, queuing is essentially sub-political: it may rely on the threat of legal enforcement but, as Barker puts it, the policeman 'melts easily into the general system of voluntary tactics'.⁴ The queue is seen as an organic formation, a series of semi-improvised, tacit understandings between ordinary people. Its self-regulating aspect allows it to be recuperated for a certain strain of English liberalism which values consensual, micro-adjustments in everyday life as a guarantor of social solidarity. As often in discussions of nationhood, these writers on queuing conflate Englishness with Britishness, assuming a connection between English traditions of decency and fair play, and British democratic institutions. The symbolic associations of the English/British queue suggest that, in the words of one theorist of queuing, 'delay is not only suffered; it is also interpreted: it has meaning for both those who wait and those who keep them waiting'.⁵ This article thus examines the post-war British queue as both a practice of quotidian life and as a repository of shifting cultural meanings about national identity, social class, and historical change.

Living in 'Queuetopia'

Why did so many observers comment on the patience and fortitude of British queuers in the 1940s? One reason for this preoccupation was that there was nothing trivial about queuing etiquette at this time: waiting in line was a fraught, politically charged activity rather than simply a minor irritation in daily life. With the continuation and

¹ George Orwell, 'The English People', in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 3. *As I Please 1943-1945* (Harmondsworth, 1970), 16.

² George Mikes, *How to Be an Alien: A Handbook for Beginners and More Advanced Pupils* (London, 1958), 48.

³ Ernest Barker, 'An Attempt at Perspective', in E. Barker (ed.), *The Character of England* (Oxford, 1947), 562.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 562.

⁵ Barry Schwartz, *Queuing and Waiting: Studies in the Social Organization of Access and Delay* (Chicago, 1975), 7.

extension of rationing and shortages after the war, it was housewives who had to do most of the queuing. When a male Mass Observation diarist cheerily asserted that 'the queue is, really, the 1945 edition of the Mother's Meeting',⁶ he may have been speaking with the luxury of the non-participant. Mothers would organize queuing rallies, getting their children to stand in line before daylight and then taking their place nearer the head of the queue. Women would join a queue without knowing what was at the end of it, in the expectation (not always fulfilled) that it must be for sought-after goods.⁷ The government was sufficiently worried about the health consequences of women standing in line for long periods that in September 1945 it introduced a scheme to give priority to expectant mothers, by affixing a label to their ration books saying: 'Queue priority, please'.⁸ In one Second World War joke, a shopkeeper says to a young woman: 'Excuse me, miss, are you pregnant?' She replies: 'Well, I wasn't when I joined the queue.'⁹

Wartime Home Intelligence had often reported that long periods of waiting in line weakened morale, and that 'peace talks [were] being fostered in queues'.¹⁰ As the end of the war brought the expectation of a return to normal life, though, hardships that had been reluctantly endured became openly politicized. The Mothers' League, founded in July 1945, began its life with a campaign against queuing, and another new organization, the British Housewives' League, organized a 'queue revolt' in the following month.¹¹ The Ministry of Food was sufficiently worried about social unrest that it began sending its staff to join queues and report on what people were grumbling about.¹² Fortunately for the government, the initial focus of women's grievances was the (usually male) shopkeeper, who, in an era of single lines and counter service, wielded considerable power. The *Sunday Graphic* criticized 'the recalcitrant, domineering, bureaucratic shopkeeper... the man to whom a queue outside his shop is the breath of life, because it bolsters up his self-conceit'.¹³ People also vented their frustration at others standing in line. Home Intelligence claimed during the war that queues were

⁶ Simon Garfield, *Our Hidden Lives: The Everyday Diaries of a Forgotten Britain 1945-1948* (London, 2004), 138.

⁷ Paul Addison, *Now the War is Over: A Social History of Britain 1945-1951* (London, 1995), 31.

⁸ 'Shopping Queues: Priority for Expectant Mothers', *The Times*, 5 September 1945.

⁹ Jonathan Sale, 'Have We Queued Our Last?', *The Independent*, 2 January 1994.

¹⁰ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption 1939-1955* (Oxford, 2000), 77. See also Penny Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict* (London, 1989), 113.

¹¹ 'Anti-Queue Campaign', *The Times*, 15 August 1945.

¹² Maureen Waller, *London 1945: Life in the Debris of War* (London, 2004), 203.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 204.

'hot-beds of anti-Semitism' because of the widespread belief that Jews 'always manage to get hold of more food than other people'.¹⁴ Queues, far from being celebrated as egalitarian, were widely seen as inequitable. People queued for unrationed but scarce foods like fruit, vegetables, and fish, or rationed food like meat when they wanted better cuts. Working women, the elderly and mothers with babies thought this unfair because they were less able to queue for long periods.¹⁵

If queues were largely experienced as a series of local resentments and frustrations in daily lives, this also made them ripe for exploitation as political capital. A Mass Observation Survey of September 1948 reported that there was 'no other current topic that arouses such immediate and fierce reaction...as the subject of queues...which clearly to many is the symbol of all the frustrations of this post war era'.¹⁶ The public attitude to queues formed part of a redefinition of the relationship between the government and the people during these years. At no other time in history had British people expected the state to do more to improve their lives, but there was also widespread dislike of bureaucratic 'red tape' and government inefficiency.¹⁷ In such circumstances, the unpopularity of queues was a godsend for opposition politicians. As the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* wrote after the Labour government had won the 1950 election with a greatly reduced majority: 'Few of our national disorders have made better campaign material than...the continual queues, the swelling bureaucracy...and the general mechanisation of the British Way of Life'.¹⁸ In the final years of the post-war Labour government, queuing was part of a politicized mythology in which 'the state socialism of the late 1940s became inextricably entangled with another phenomenon: austerity'.¹⁹

The Conservative leader, Winston Churchill, was particularly adept at symbolically identifying queues not simply with the failure to shake off the privations of wartime, but with a new and pernicious form of government. He first made the claim that 'Socialism meant queueing' after the highly unpopular decision in July 1946 to ration bread, an item that had escaped restrictions during the war itself.²⁰ During a 1949 by-election in South Hammersmith, Churchill again insisted

¹⁴ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 77.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 117-18. See also Summerfield, *Women Workers*, 111.

¹⁶ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, 118.

¹⁷ José Harris, 'Society and the State in Twentieth-Century Britain', in F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950, Volume 3: Social Agencies and Institutions* (Cambridge, 1990), 91.

¹⁸ 'Queueutopia', *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 2 March 1950.

¹⁹ Addison, *Now the War is Over*, x.

²⁰ 'Mr Churchill's Attack on Government', *The Times*, 20 July 1946.

that 'the queues of housewives outside the shops are the essence of Socialism and the restrictive system by which it and its parasites hope to live'.²¹ In a pre-election radio broadcast of 21 January 1950, Churchill first used the term 'Queueutopia' to describe a Britain under Socialist rule.²² Speaking in Woodford, Essex a few days later, he quoted a line from the Labour manifesto: 'The policy of putting the children at the head of the queue will be continued.' The next sentence in the manifesto made it clear that it was referring to the supply of free milk, food supplements, and the expansion of secondary education.²³ But Churchill ignored this. As a way of critiquing what he saw as the Socialist tendency to meddle in the routine aspects of social life, he subtly conflated Labour's metaphorical queue for scarce resources with the actual queues for goods in shops:

But why should they be at the head of the queue? Why should queues become a permanent, continuous feature of our life? ... The Socialist dream is no longer Utopia, but Queueutopia... Our earnest hope is that it may be granted to us to proclaim not the continuance but the doom of the queues and restore the normal relations between the shopkeepers and the public.²⁴

Churchill's neologism, 'Queueutopia', was widely repeated by journalists and other Conservative politicians like Leo Amery, who contrasted 'the Conservatives' idea of Merrie England' with 'a drab, dead-level, rationed, utility-clothed, licensed, controlled, directed queueutopia'.²⁵ During his successful election campaign of October 1951, Churchill was still mixing up figurative with actual queues when he claimed that Conservatives and Labour stood respectively for the ladder and the queue: 'We are for the ladder. Let all try their best to climb. They are for the queue. Let each wait in his place till his turn comes'.²⁶

The Labour Party Women's Organisation clearly blamed disgruntled housewives for the party's defeat in 1951, complaining that 'the last election was lost mainly in the queue at the butcher's or the grocer's'.²⁷ In fact, working-class women had become even more supportive of Labour in the period since 1945; it was middle-class women who

²¹ 'The Socialist Quagmire', *The Times*, 19 February 1949.

²² H. G. Nicholas, *The British General Election of 1950* (London, 1951), 89.

²³ 'Labour Manifesto 1950', in F. W. S. Craig (ed.), *British General Election Manifestos 1900-1974* (London, 1975), 158.

²⁴ 'Mr Churchill on Labour Aims', *The Times*, 30 January 1950.

²⁵ 'Mr Amery on Spirit of Good Will', *The Times*, 22 February 1950.

²⁶ 'Mr Churchill's Broadcast', *The Times*, 9 October 1951.

²⁷ Labour Party Women's Organisation, *Annual Conference Report*, April 1952, quoted in James Hinton, 'Militant Housewives: The British Housewives' League and the Attlee Government', *History Workshop Journal*, 38 (1994), 129.

abandoned them more than any other group. Most of the various queue revolts had been in middle-class suburbs of cities like London, Liverpool, and Bristol.²⁸ As James Hinton points out, the revolt of middle-class women against queuing had 'an edge of status anxiety', particularly in their resentment about not being accorded due respect by shopkeepers.²⁹ After the war, many middle-class observers noted a new incivility among the working classes, or at least a refusal to return to the pre-war custom of deferring to their superiors.³⁰ The same anxiety was evident in the early 1950s in the beginnings of an undying national ritual: complaining about the decline in manners at bus queues and 'a falling off in the efficiency and courtesy of conductors and conductresses'.³¹ A leader from *The Times* in 1957 argued that the 'anger of the middle classes' reflected their belief that there is no longer 'a common system of manners' and 'it is nowadays hard to have a relationship with a subordinate which rests on mutual consideration based on acknowledged authority'.³² Surveying the various queue revolts of the late 1940s, Hinton concludes that "'fed up" is not a political identity... The morale necessary for positive revolt could not be built on grumbles alone'.³³ It is true that the queuing problem on its own had no serious electoral impact: the anti-queuing campaign of the British Housewives' League petered out after 1947, and the general disaffection with queues was not enough to swing the 1950 election for the Tories. But skilful Conservative politicians like Churchill could still take advantage of these daily frustrations, particularly by manipulating feelings of embattlement and insecurity among the middle classes, to create a more general sense of government incompetence and needless constraint.

Queuing and National Decline

As Britain entered the more affluent 1950s, the Conservatives continued to draw on, and indeed helped to generate, folk memories of austerity. In the 1955 general election, they produced pamphlets with photographs of long lines of housewives and captions reading 'Queuing for bread and potatoes in peacetime—will you ever forget it?' and 'Queues, controls, rationing—don't risk it again!'. The popular association of queues with the Attlee government allowed the Tories

²⁸ Hinton, 'Militant Housewives', 130, 138.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

³⁰ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), 531.

³¹ 'Bus Sense', *The Times*, 1 September 1954; see also J. C. Gill, 'Bus Sense' (letter), *The Times*, 3 September 1954.

³² 'Serving One Another', *The Times*, 18 April 1957.

³³ Hinton, 'Militant Housewives', 149.

to make the unfair charge that Labour would re-introduce rationing if re-elected.³⁴ As late as March 1957, the new Prime Minister Harold Macmillan recalled the size of weekly rations when Labour left office in 1951, and claimed that only the Tory belief in the free market had allowed the country to escape from 'this Socialist Utopia, or Queuetopia'.³⁵

What really put paid to shop queues was the final abolition of rationing in 1954, and the end of building restrictions in the same year which allowed many shops to be converted to self-service.³⁶ Government advisers saw the importation of this American retail method as a way of coping with labour shortages, cutting costs and increasing sales. The US Technical Assistance and Productivity Programme (USTAPP) established under the Marshall Plan, organizations like the Anglo-American Council on Productivity and trade journals like *The Grocer* all promoted 'the gospel of self-service'.³⁷ Many housewives were initially sceptical about supermarkets, worried about the loss of personal service, the temptation to overspend and even being accused of stealing goods bought in other shops. Drawing on memories of rationing, self-service advocates reassured them with the promise of queueless shopping: they would only have to queue to pay, with no time-consuming weighing and wrapping of food; and 'those requiring few items could obtain them speedily, while others could shop at their leisure'.³⁸ One upbeat newspaper article of 1959 claimed that self-service 'saves thousands of hours of queueing time every day', and that even a queue was now only 'a queue in one store as opposed to queues in four or five shops'.³⁹ This optimism proved to be somewhat premature. By 1964, the Consumer Council was reporting that the most common complaint of supermarket shoppers was the length of queues at the checkouts.⁴⁰

If queuing slipped off the political agenda in these years, it still remained a significant annoyance in everyday life. One measure of this irritation, particularly among members of the middle classes, is what E.P. Thompson in another context calls 'the epistolary *levée en masse* of the readers of *The Times*'.⁴¹ For a long period from the late

³⁴ D. E. Butler, *The British General Election of 1955* (London, 1969), 23, 120–30.

³⁵ 'Government Determination to Achieve Opportunity State', *The Times*, 19 March 1957.

³⁶ Gareth Shaw, Louise Curth, and Andrew Alexander, 'Selling Self-Service and the Supermarket: The Americanisation of Food Retailing in Britain, 1945–60', *Business History*, 46 (2004), 573.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 572.

³⁸ Louise Curth, Gareth Shaw and Andrew Alexander, 'Streamlining Shopping', *History Today*, November 2002, 35.

³⁹ 'New Self-Service Shops a Month', *The Times*, 9 March 1959.

⁴⁰ 'Waits at Supermarkets', *The Times*, 27 May 1964.

⁴¹ E. P. Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight* (London, 1980), 39.

1950s to the late 1970s, for example, *The Times* readers complained endlessly about the queues in branches of large bureaucratic organizations, particularly high street banks and post offices. The main complaint about high street banks was their restricted opening times, which meant that customers had to form long queues at peak hours such as lunchtime. From about 1960 onwards, the banks attracted many new customers as they made a successful effort to promote the 'banking habit' among working-class people who had not previously held accounts.⁴² But the banks essentially formed a cartel that resisted competitive pressures. With a near monopoly on personal accounts, they saw little reason to convenience their customers by making it easy for them to get at their own money. The situation worsened in 1969 when, under pressure from the National Union of Bank Employees, the banks stopped opening on Saturday mornings.⁴³

Post offices had longer business hours but other problems. With the introduction of a comprehensive welfare state in the late 1940s, the Post Office now had to handle a much wider range of transactions, such as family allowances, unemployment benefit, and old age pensions. But it also had to cope with rising costs and falling profits as volumes of mail declined. It was around this time, as Martin Daunton puts it, that carping about the Post Office became 'a national pastime'.⁴⁴ Counter services were often inefficiently run. The trade unions, worried about maintaining wage levels, prevented the employment of more women and part-time staff which might have speeded up service at peak times.⁴⁵ Postage stamps could only be bought in post offices, and the stamp machines outside were primitively mechanical (only issuing a number of stamps of different values) and often broken.⁴⁶ Counter opening hours had to be shortened in the late 1960s as a way of cutting costs to offset declining profits.⁴⁷

If there was one thing that united frustrated queuers in both banks and post offices, it was their resentment at the series of multiple queues for different cashiers, which meant that unlucky people could be stuck for ages behind another customer with a lengthy transaction. Time and again, *The Times* letter-writers pleaded for this cumbersome arrangement to be replaced by a single-queue system, perhaps with

⁴² Robin Pringle, *A Guide to Banking in Britain* (London, 1973), 27.

⁴³ Colin Webb, 'Never on a Saturday', *The Times*, 28 June 1969.

⁴⁴ Martin J. Daunton, *Royal Mail: The Post Office since 1840* (London, 1986), 337.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁴⁶ Leon Metcalfe, *The Post Office and its Services* (London, 1972), 24; 'Reducing Queues in Post Offices', *The Times*, 30 April 1960.

⁴⁷ 'Shorter Day for Post Offices', *The Times*, 17 May 1966; see also Daunton, *Royal Mail*, 347.

an additional express till for quick deposits and withdrawals.⁴⁸ Much more was going on here than simple impatience. The queues in banks and post offices, although they were not as bad as the shop queues of the late 1940s, began to be linked implicitly with the issue of national decline which dominated political discussion and social commentary from the late 1950s onwards. This declinist rhetoric was often culturally exceptionalist, blaming deep-rooted psychological and social factors for national economic failure.⁴⁹ Since a queue forms when there is a failure to match supply with demand, its stubborn visibility in daily life could be imagined as a symptom of the 'British disease' of badly trained, poorly motivated employees and mediocre management.⁵⁰ Complaints about queues often made the invidious national comparisons that were part of the classic discourse of decline, with their claims that Britain lagged hopelessly behind advanced queueing practices in America or the rest of Europe. As with much of the more generalized journalistic discussion of decline, these claims were rarely supported by firm evidence.⁵¹

In the 1960s, as political and cultural détente allowed more information to filter out about the everyday lives of people behind the Iron Curtain, long queues became more generally associated with the inefficiencies of command economies. People in the Eastern bloc still had to queue up for scarce items that westerners now regarded as essential, and in the Russian retail trade there was a famously inefficient three-queue system which required customers to line up firstly to view goods, secondly to pay for them and finally to obtain them.⁵² Over the next two decades, it became something of a journalistic cliché to say that the queues in certain British institutions were longer than anywhere 'this side of Moscow'.⁵³ In the early 1980s, for example, the right-wing thinker Roger Scruton grouped queues along with other aspects of an impoverished daily life in communist regimes, before evoking popular memories of the 1940s:

The visitor to the 'socialist' countries comes away with the overwhelming impression of having travelled backwards in time. The smell of coal fires, the

⁴⁸ Richard Knox, 'Bank's Cue' (letter), *The Times*, 4 November 1971; P. B. Soul, 'Speeding Up the Post Office Queue' (letter), *The Times*, 5 December 1975.

⁴⁹ Robert Colls, *Identity of England* (Oxford, 2002), 143; George L. Bernstein, *The Myth of Decline: The Rise of Britain Since 1945* (London, 2004), xii–xiii.

⁵⁰ Correlli Barnett, *The Lost Victory: British Dreams, British Realities, 1945–1950* (London, 1995), xii; see also 'What is the British Disease?', *The Times*, 29 April 1971.

⁵¹ See 'Reducing Queues in Post Offices'; Soul, 'Speeding up the Post Office Queue'.

⁵² 'Getting Rid of Soviet Queues', *The Times*, 24 May 1966; see also Schwartz, *Queueing and Waiting*, 13, 24.

⁵³ Polly Toynbee, 'Should the Post Office be a Public Service or a Commercial Enterprise?', *The Guardian*, 8 October 1984.

sight of trams and steam trains, the decaying, uncared-for buildings, the empty shops, the queues of people in drab imperfect clothing, the sense of an overbearing public concern which gathers people up and robs them of initiative: all this returns the visitor to a distant experience, a confused memory of ration books and Pathé newsreels.⁵⁴

Correlli Barnett, the influential historian of national decline, was still making this analogy in the mid-1990s as part of his argument that Britain's post-war problems stemmed from the 'New Jerusalemism' of the liberal idealists of the 1940s who committed the country to a welfare state. 'In the emptiness of its shops and the length of its queues,' he wrote, 'Britain in the late 1940s much resembled Russia in the 1990s.'⁵⁵ The Churchillian idea of the queue as the quotidian manifestation of meddling socialism had proved remarkably persistent.

The implicit association of queuing with national decline was reinforced during the economic downturn and industrial unrest of the 1970s. The real nadir for queuers was the last months of Edward Heath's government. During the oil crisis of late 1973, thousands of people queued outside post offices to receive petrol ration books.⁵⁶ There were queues in banks as they had to reduce their opening hours during the December power cuts because of restrictions on the use of heating and lighting in offices.⁵⁷ During a train drivers' work-to-rule that disrupted postal services, thousands of people queued up at the few open post offices to send parcels off for Christmas.⁵⁸ For the middle-aged and older, it was an uncomfortable reminder of the deprivations of wartime and its aftermath.

If these narratives of everyday inconvenience were explicitly related to a discourse of national decline, they were also more subtly inflected with assumptions about social class. No one can pull rank in a queue, which may be frustrating for those who regard their time as more valuable than that of others. The petty irritations of daily life were another source of what *The Times* again called 'the anger of the middle class', a low-level frustration to go along with more commonly voiced anxieties about strikes, taxation and inflation.⁵⁹ Like the protests of middle-class housewives in the 1940s, complaints about queues in banks and post offices during these years often revealed elements of class snobbery. One leader writer for *The Times* worried in 1960 about

⁵⁴ Roger Scruton, 'Over the Polls, a Hint of Big Brother', *The Times*, 10 May 1983.

⁵⁵ Barnett, *The Lost Victory*, 174.

⁵⁶ Martin Huckerby, 'Thousands Wait in the Cold for Petrol Coupons but Most Queues Disappear', *The Times*, 30 November 1973.

⁵⁷ 'Banks Consider Revision of Opening Hours', *The Times*, 18 December 1973.

⁵⁸ Christopher Walker, 'Post Office Queues Beat Parcels Ban', *The Times*, 17 December 1973.

⁵⁹ 'The Anger of the Middle Class', *The Times*, 11 January 1975.

the prospect of being stuck in the post office queue behind an 'agricultural gentleman... paying in vast sums in copper and silver', or an 'odious office boy' who has 'a long list of stamps he is to buy'.⁶⁰ As bank accounts ceased to be a middle-class monopoly in the late 1960s, one reader of *The Times* imagined a nightmarish bank in which 'the one cashier who is not on his lunch hour is attempting to deal with a long queue headed by the local fairground owner paying in the previous day's takings followed by some old lady wishing to transfer her account to the Outer Hebrides'.⁶¹

The middle classes did not, in fact, have to wait until the market revolution of the Thatcher era for the queuing problem to be addressed. Bodies like the Consumers' Association, founded in 1956 with a largely middle-class, professional membership, and the government-sponsored Consumer Council, founded in 1963, campaigned for improved services from public and private companies, often focusing on the extension of opening hours and better management of queues.⁶² From the late 1960s onwards, banks responded to a series of public policy pressures (from organizations like the Monopolies and Mergers Commission and, from 1973, the Office of Fair Trading) and market pressures (from the Post Office's National Girobank and the building societies, which had longer opening hours).⁶³ In 1967, the Chairman of Barclays Bank made an ambitious promise to relegate counter queues to 'the remoter history of banking'.⁶⁴ There was also a long, pre-Thatcherite tradition of trying to make the Post Office more responsive to consumers, particularly after a 1969 Act turned it from a government department into a public corporation. In response to these consumerist pressures, both the banks and the Post Office tried to improve queuing times in their branches, by introducing automated counter functions, quick-service tills and stamp machines.⁶⁵ Banks and post offices even experimented with single queues in large branches in the 1970s, but they were not widely applied. Branch managers usually claimed that it was impossible to lay down hard and fast rules for all branches at all times of the day and week.⁶⁶ Although it was widely recognized that queuing was a problem, it had not yet formed part

⁶⁰ 'Posting with Pleasure', *The Times*, 4 August 1960.

⁶¹ C. Stout, 'Lunch Break' (letter), *The Times*, 17 September 1968.

⁶² See Matthew Hilton, 'The Fable of the Sheep, or Private Virtues, Public Vices: The Consumer Revolution of the Twentieth Century', *Past and Present*, 176 (2002), 222–56.

⁶³ John Grady and Martin Weale, *British Banking, 1960–85* (Basingstoke, 1986), 81.

⁶⁴ 'Address by the Chairman to the Stockholders (Barclays Bank Display Advertising)', *The Times*, 17 January 1967.

⁶⁵ 'Bank's War on Counter Queues', *The Times*, 24 May 1967.

⁶⁶ John Hunsworth, 'Peak Period in Bank Branches' (letter), *The Times*, 9 November 1971; D. E. Roberts, 'Post Office Queues' (letter), *The Times*, 10 December 1975.

of management science and there was little general agreement about how to address it.

Britain Isn't Working

For believers in national decline, the iconography of the queue was highly adaptable. It could signify the poor service that unwieldy organizations provided to their customers, or it could signify the growing numbers of people receiving state benefits, what Barnett calls the 'dank reality of a segregated, sub-literate, unskilled, unhealthy and institutionalised proletariat hanging on the nipple of state maternalism'.⁶⁷ In the late 1970s and 1980s, in particular, the 'dole queue' became a compelling symbol of economic and cultural decline. This image of the dole queue was immortalized in Saatchi and Saatchi's famous Conservative Party poster, shown at hundreds of sites around Britain between July and October 1978: a photograph of a long, snaking queue of people leading to an unemployment office, accompanied by the slogan: 'Labour isn't working'. When the Prime Minister, James Callaghan, failed to call an election as expected that autumn, the poster was recycled in the next year's campaign, now with the slogan: 'Labour *still* isn't working'.

The Labour Party complained that the people displayed in the dole queue on the poster were not unemployed at all, but Saatchi employees. In fact, they were members of Hendon Young Conservatives and their parents.⁶⁸ They were asked to assemble at a north London park for the shoot, but only 20 loyalists turned up. So the photographer used a rope to mark out a meandering line and the volunteers gradually moved along it. These images were then brought together in a composite photograph, with the faces out of focus to conceal the duplication. The Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, Denis Healey, accused the Tories of 'selling politics like soap powder'.⁶⁹ Angus Maude, the Tory Party deputy chairman, responded with a telling take on the 'shame' of unemployment: 'It is the Conservative Party's view that the tragedy of 1,500,000 people out of work should not be aggravated by their being photographed and possibly recognized on poster hoardings.'⁷⁰ The Labour charge of fakery only gave the

⁶⁷ Correlli Barnett, *The Audit of War: The Illusion and Reality of Britain as a Great Nation* (London, 1986), 304.

⁶⁸ David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1979* (Basingstoke, 1980), 140.

⁶⁹ "Epoch-making" Poster was Clever Fake, *BBC News Online*, 16 March 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>.

⁷⁰ "Volunteers" Queued for Tory Poster, *The Times*, 3 August 1978.

poster more publicity. In a poll by the advertising trade magazine *Campaign* in 1999, 'Labour isn't working' was judged the best billboard poster of the century, largely because it was believed to have helped the Tories win the 1979 election.⁷¹ While the electoral impact is difficult to determine, it was certainly an effective campaign. The poster's memorable image and its caption's clever double meaning—referring to both unemployment and a more general national malaise—served a similar function to the Conservatives' evocation of queues in the early 1950s: it equated socialism with government incompetence.

The dole queue continued to be an iconic image in the Thatcher years as the unemployment figures rose dramatically, peaking at over three million in 1986. In the 1987 general election, Labour poked fun at Saatchi's advertisement with its own poster, an illustration of another dole queue with the slogan: 'The millions or the millionaires. We all know who the Tories care about.' Unlike the Saatchi advert, Labour claimed, the people pictured in its poster were genuinely out of work. But journalists soon discovered that it depicted not an actual 'dole queue' but a group of people hired at the Camden Unemployment Centre for £25 each and taken to a disused office in east London. Lord Young, the Secretary of State for Employment, accused the Camden office of 'manufacturing dole queues for Labour'.⁷²

These controversies over 'faked' posters show not simply how symbolic the dole queue had become in 1980s political culture, but how contrived the imagery was in general. The term 'dole queue' was coined in the 1930s, and references to it in the Thatcher era recalled earlier images of men in northern towns queuing up outside 'the labour' in cloth caps and overcoats, which had become part of collective national memory. In 'The Lion and the Unicorn', for example, Orwell included 'the queues outside the Labour Exchanges' in his list of characteristic 'fragments of the English scene'.⁷³ From the late 1960s onwards, government phased out cash handouts for the dole, sending out 'Giro' cheques in the post instead; and in the early 1970s, labour exchanges were replaced by 'job centres', with separate offices now dealing with the administration of unemployment

⁷¹ 'Tories' "Labour isn't Working" Judged the Century's Top Poster', *Campaign*, 15 October 1999, 1.

⁷² Michael McCarthy, 'Labour Puts A "Phoney" Dole Queue To Work', *The Times*, 24 April 1987.

⁷³ George Orwell, 'The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius', in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 2. *My Country Right or Left 1940-1943* (Harmondsworth, 1970), 75-6. For a discussion of the anachronistic iconography of the 1980s 'dole queue', see Ben Pimlott, *Frustrate Their Knaveish Tricks: Writings on Biography, History and Politics* (London, 1994), 167-71.

benefits.⁷⁴ By the time of the Thatcher era, then, the 'dole queue' was an adaptable and confusing phrase: it could mean the unemployment statistics for the country as a whole, or actual people waiting at unemployment offices (to 'sign on' as available for work and to claim benefits), job centres (to look for work), and post offices (to cash benefit cheques).

Unemployment offices in the 1970s and 1980s were bare and depressing places. Claimants had to wait for an hour or more, there were few amenities to alleviate the wait, and forbidding Perspex screens shielded clerical officers from claimants.⁷⁵ But single-line queuing was no longer universal. In the mid-1970s, one unemployed journalist noted that the Brixton unemployment office was opening unofficially at 8.30 every morning because 'if they wait for nine o'clock the queue [outside] looks rather bad'.⁷⁶ Claimants were also sometimes asked to stand in line once inside, but from the early 1980s onwards they were more likely to sit down and wait to be called. An unemployed man wrote to *The Times* in 1982, claiming never to have seen an actual 'dole queue' and suspecting 'the motives of those appearing to represent the unemployed as a mass of downtrodden working-class heroes'.⁷⁷ Equally, the imagery of a long, standing line of jobless people, usually northern men, could visually convey the effects of dying industries and welfare-state dependency. The bleak unemployment offices in television programmes like Alan Bleasdale's drama *Boys from the Blackstuff* (1982) and Carla Lane's sitcom *Bread* (1986-91), both of which were set in Liverpool, encapsulated the regional inequalities of this era.

In the later film *The Full Monty* (1997), the dole queue has become part of a more generalized cultural vocabulary. Five unemployed Sheffield steelworkers, training to be male strippers, stand in line at an unemployment office while their leader, Gaz (Robert Carlyle), watches them from another queue. When Donna Summer's 'Hot Stuff' starts playing on the radio, the men go into a synchronized dance routine, at first surreptitiously and then more animatedly. This scene became so famous that Prince Charles was invited to re-enact it for the news cameras in November 1998, during a visit to Sheffield's Burton Street project, where the scene was filmed. The 1980s dole queue was now such a recognized image that it could

⁷⁴ 'Modern Techniques Dispel Old Dole Atmosphere', *The Times*, 24 April 1975.

⁷⁵ David Hearst, 'Dole Office Strain Takes Toll on Staff and Claimants', *The Guardian*, 13 August 1985.

⁷⁶ 'Diary', *The Times*, 13 October 1975.

⁷⁷ P. J. Goatly, 'Image of a Problem' (letter), *The Times*, 29 November 1982.

be gently subverted, stripped of its more uncomfortable historical associations.

Queuing and Thatcherism

As the dole queues 'lengthened' in the Thatcher era, queuing in other public spaces was transformed by the growth of queue management systems, which drew heavily on an amalgam of statistics and management science known as 'queuing theory'. Queuing theory deals with situations in which customers arrive in 'Poisson distribution': in unpredictable numbers, at variable intervals, and requiring different periods of service. It took off with the advent of computers in the 1950s and had been used since then to deal with large-scale waiting systems such as the rotation of hospital beds, airport runway control or urban traffic jams.⁷⁸ In the 1980s, it was increasingly applied to the management of actual queues in supermarkets, banks, and post offices. The 'thinking ticket machine', for example, aimed to do away with lines of people altogether. Numbered ticket dispensers were developed in Sweden in the 1960s, and the British firm Lonsto sold its first model to Tesco and Green Shield in the 1970s.⁷⁹ In the 1980s, this queue management system began to be used more widely in places where people might have a long wait, like train booking centres, doctors' surgeries, and passport offices. Queuers took a numbered ticket from a dispenser and waited for their number to appear on an electronic display, thus eliminating the problem of them having to stand in line for long periods.

Such technology did not develop in a vacuum, but within the context of a much wider consumerist and managerial revolution. During the Thatcher era, public services were either privatized or subjected by regulators to various forms of market discipline. The disciplinary techniques of this 'new public management' included the 'naming and shaming' of inefficient operators, quality incentive contracts, performance targets, and codes of practice. Private firms now also produced mission statements and benchmark standards, promising to increase both 'customer satisfaction' and 'shareholder value'. In both the public and private sectors, managers set themselves the dual, sometimes conflicting, aims of serving the consumer and cutting costs. Reducing queues was a relatively painless and uncontentious way for organizations to square this circle. Unlike some other aspects of customer service, queuing times were empirically measurable, and

⁷⁸ Schwartz, *Queuing and Waiting*, 3.

⁷⁹ 'Keeping People in Line', *Director*, 49 (May 1996), 18.

the queue management industry promised to design systems that both served people more quickly and minimized costs by cutting down on employee 'idle time'. In 1985, for example, British Rail published a 'Code of Practice' in which it promised a maximum three-minute queuing time (or five minutes at peak periods) for customers buying tickets. This target was to be achieved through electronic ticket machines which would allow the phasing out of ticket sales at counters in certain stations, and a subsequent reduction of staff costs.⁸⁰ By the late 1980s, the London Underground had similarly installed electronic ticket machines and automated barriers in all its central stations. This reduced queues by speeding up the process of buying and checking tickets, while cutting down on ticket dodging and allowing barrier staff and booking clerks to leave through 'natural wastage'.⁸¹

The banks had long been under pressure to extend their opening hours, and they slowly began to do this in the early Thatcher years, with Barclays the first to re-open on Saturday mornings in 1982. Banks increasingly set themselves 'service challenges' in which, for example, staff had to answer telephone calls within four rings, or ensure that the number of customers waiting in a queue did not exceed the number of cashier positions open.⁸² In the long run, however, the ATM (automatic teller machine) was a more cost-effective way for banks to demonstrate improved customer service. Banks had experimented with cashpoint machines as early as the late 1960s, primarily in response to Saturday closing, but they really began to proliferate in the early 1980s. The cashpoint allowed the banks to offer the basic service that most customers wanted—withdrawal cash—without upsetting the employees' unions or increasing labour costs by further extending opening hours.

The Post Office also embraced queue management enthusiastically. The Carter Committee of 1977 had recommended that the Post Office give more attention to operational research,⁸³ and a 1988 report by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC) showed how much this advice had been followed. All post offices now worked towards a target of serving 95 per cent of customers within five minutes. Branch managers had to provide daily sampling and statistical analysis of

⁸⁰ British Railways Board, *Code of Practice and Guide to Customer Services* (July 1985); see also Terry Gourvish, *British Rail 1974–97: From Integration to Privatisation* (Oxford, 2002), 271; and John Ardill, 'Mixed Reaction To "Getting There" Code', *The Guardian*, 5 July 1985.

⁸¹ 'Tube Tickets Automated', *The Times*, 14 May 1985; Christian Wolmar, *Down the Tube: The Battle for London's Underground* (London, 2002), 67.

⁸² Maria Scott, 'High Street Banks In Service Shake-Up', *The Independent*, 27 June 1992.

⁸³ C. F. Carter, *Report of the Post Office Review Committee* (London, 1977), 90.

queuing times. Queue simulation computer programs, such as Q-SIM and Q-SCHED, explored the relationship between predictable queuing peaks, such as Thursday mornings, when benefits were usually paid, and unpredictable peaks caused by the weather and the arrival of buses.⁸⁴ While the MMC noted with approval that post offices were now converting from multi- to single-queuing, it recommended that there should be a 'customer signalling system' as a way of letting queuers know when cashiers were free.⁸⁵ By 1993, the Post Office had introduced a queue system known as 'electronic call forward' (ECF), which was also adopted in many banks. In ECF, each cashier presses a button when they are free, which activates dot-matrix displays and a recorded voice ('cashier number five, please') informing the person at the head of the queue where to go.

The large supermarket chains were at the cutting edge of queuing innovations, aware that they could help to promote customer loyalty in a fiercely competitive market. In the late 1960s, British supermarkets began importing queue-management innovations from Sweden, Germany, and Switzerland, such as express tills, checkout conveyor belts, and 'multibay' checkouts with two or three separate compartments, each holding the purchases of a different customer.⁸⁶ Electronic point-of-sale terminals, introduced in most supermarkets by the mid-1980s, also promised to alleviate queues. Checkout staff now simply had to pass the product's barcode through a laser for the price to be registered. While this did not make supermarket queues 'a thing of the past', as one journalist confidently predicted in 1985, it did speed up service.⁸⁷ It also had other advantages for the supermarkets, allowing them to check stock levels more precisely and eliminate 'sweetheart' transactions (checkout operators reducing the bill for friends and family) by providing a form of electronic surveillance.⁸⁸

In the early 1990s, supermarkets began using assistants to pack bags for customers, and made pledges to open more checkouts by calling on 'queue busters', staff on the shop floor who would stop what they were doing and operate checkouts at busy times. Less publicly, they invested money in training checkout operators to work more quickly.⁸⁹ In 1995, Safeway introduced 'Shop and Go', an American innovation that allowed customers to scan goods themselves with a personal handset before paying at the checkout.

⁸⁴ Monopolies and Mergers Commission, *Post Office Counters Services* (London 1988), 103–8.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁸⁶ 'Technique for a Quick Exit', *The Times*, 25 April 1969.

⁸⁷ 'Lasers to End Queues at Shop Checkouts', *The Times*, 13 July 1985.

⁸⁸ 'Laser Revolution on the Way for Supermarkets', *The Times*, 21 November 1979.

⁸⁹ Mintel International Group, *Customer Care in Retailing—UK* (London, March 2001).

If self-scanning was sold as a means of shortening checkout queues, it also allowed supermarkets to cut staff costs and build up useful profiles of shoppers, in the same way as loyalty cards.⁹⁰ It did not necessarily decrease shopping time for customers, which perhaps explains why it was not applied as widely as other 'queue-busting' techniques. These techniques were always partly motivated by public relations, with supermarkets having to convince shoppers that their motivation was customer care rather than rationalization.

Being primarily market-led, the Thatcherite queuing revolution was an uneven phenomenon. In low-status public spaces, such as bus stops, where consumer satisfaction was not so easily measurable or valued, people were still left to improvise their own queue discipline. Bus services had been in decline since the 1950s, and by the 1980s they were disproportionately used by (and associated with) women, children, students, elderly, and poor people. In 1991, the social historian Patrick Wright wrote about waiting for a bus in the downbeat area of Dalston Lane in East London, where he lived. 'For as long as I can remember,' he began, 'conservatively inclined commentators have been lamenting the decline of the London bus queue.' For these critics, Wright argued, 'the London bus stop symbolises the very spine of the nation, and the ominous blurring that can be seen at its edges is a sign of fatal degeneration'.⁹¹ (As noted above, this jeremiad dates from at least the early 1950s.) Wright believed that, although the regimented single-line queue might have disappeared, there was still a protocol among people waiting for London buses. The West End was indeed a 'sordid scrum', in which unprincipled natives shamelessly pushed past unsuspecting tourists. But in quieter, residential areas, aggression and cheek did not always win out, as 'each time a bus pulls up the crowd negotiates a messy but still intricately structured settlement between the ideal of the orderly queue and the chaotic stampede'.⁹² For Wright, this *modus operandi* was intimately related to the marginalization of bus users: 'Whatever your origins or standing in the wider world, to be waiting at a bus stop in Dalston Junction is to have joined the ranks of the underdog'.⁹³ In the absence of any market or political pressure to manage the queues more efficiently, bus users had to fend for themselves and work out their own shambolic but still workable etiquette. Far from being a sign of moral decline or incipient social anarchy, the disintegration of the bus queue pointed

⁹⁰ David Bell and Gill Valentine, *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat* (London, 1997), 137.

⁹¹ Patrick Wright, *A Journey Through Ruins: The Last Days of London* (London, 1991), 121.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 125.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 124.

to the class-specific nature of the Thatcherite 'consumer', whose satisfaction had to be constantly sought and measured in the new managerial culture.

Queuing and the Public Sphere

In the Thatcher era, commercial imperatives increasingly influenced the most mundane routines of daily life. The growing use of the single queue created a market for queuing furniture, manufactured by firms like Tensator and Q-Matic, such as metal poles with rounded bases and strips of retractable webbed tape at the top, which could be drawn out and attached to other poles to form queuing channels. Enclosed within these channels, customers could not escape invitations to impulse-buy from strategically placed baskets of goods; even the retractable tape on queuing poles was printed with promotional messages or logos. The most energetic advocate of these marketing opportunities was the Post Office. According to the neoliberal logic of improving performance through internal competition, Post Office Counters was revamped in the early 1980s to make it more of a business in its own right, eventually becoming a separate subsidiary of the Royal Mail in 1986. Post offices now had to tout for more business by selling premium bonds, stationery, coin sets, and souvenir stamps. Large red video display units were placed in post office queues, showing advertisements for Postman Pat stationery and other new Royal Mail products.⁹⁴ In his 1994 study of the daily life of Farnham in Surrey, Richard Hoggart complained about these inescapable sales pitches:

Formerly nationalised services which have now been privatised, or made into executive agencies which have been ordered to act as if privatised and to develop aggressive commercial habits, drop their old sobriety and do promotional high-kicks—like a teetotaller who has been urged to take to the bottle for therapeutic purposes. By comparison, some of the shrewder large commercial concerns begin to look like church-wardens.⁹⁵

For Hoggart, the post office queue epitomized the impoverishment of the public sphere by the pure commercial logic of Thatcherism. For right-wing commentators, though, the post office queue was still where the middle classes encountered the lazy and feckless. During the early 1990s, as the unemployment figures again rose above three million after a dip during the late 1980s, the Conservative minister

⁹⁴ Postman Pat was a popular children's cartoon character of the time.

⁹⁵ Richard Hoggart, *Townscape with Figures: Farnham: Portrait of an English Town* (London, 1994), 88–9.

Michael Portillo revived the notion of a 'silent majority' as a familiar code for the 'forgotten' or beleaguered middle classes in Anglo-American political culture. In a speech in April 1994, he invoked 'the still small voice of Britain's quiet majority' which is 'dismayed by much that goes on around it', offering the example of hard-working citizens

standing in the post office queue watching handouts going to people who seem capable of work... In a world turned upside down, they ask where is the encouragement for self-reliance, where is the punishment for wrong-doing, where is the incentive to achieve?⁹⁶

The typical post office queue illustrated Portillo's argument well because it brought together an eclectic mix: poor people cashing benefits and more prosperous people buying stamps, posting parcels, or depositing takings from small businesses. Portillo's encouragement to make snap judgements about other people in the queue exploited the nature of the post office as a point of middle-class contact with the 'giro economy'.

In a 2004 *Daily Mail* article, the journalist Max Hastings surveyed the history of queuing in the post-war era. 'Nothing more vividly demonstrates the British experience since 1979 than queues', he wrote. 'Once upon a time in this country, one waited for everything.' Thatcher's enterprise culture had changed all this, and queues had largely disappeared in private firms. But they still remained in the public sector:

Britain has entered the 21st century recognising the queue as a natural feature of everything for which government is responsible: hospitals, good schools, airport passport controls, commuter routes—and post offices. Here are the bastions of public sector trades unionism, unlimited sick leave, sloppy and heedless staff, absolute indifference to customer interest.⁹⁷

Hastings's article was written in response to the Chief Executive of the Post Office, David Mills, who had created a media controversy by arguing that people waiting in post offices actually enjoyed queuing. Hastings disagreed, claiming that queues 'are a symbol of failure. If people are being forced to queue for things, it is because at the front of the line is incompetence.'⁹⁸ But Hastings's short history of queuing was incomplete. Queue management had penetrated the public as much as the private sector, and the Post Office had always

⁹⁶ Michael Portillo, 'The Conservative Agenda' (Speech to North-East Fife Conservative Association in Freuchie, 22 April 1994), in George Gardiner (ed.), *Clear Blue Water: A Compendium of Speeches and Interviews given by the Rt Hon Michael Portillo MP* (London, 1994), 38.

⁹⁷ Max Hastings, 'No Thank-Queue!', *Daily Mail*, 7 September 2004.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

been at the forefront of such innovations. True, it was one of the last state-owned utilities and gained much of its income from administering benefit payments for government departments. But from the late 1990s onwards, benefits were increasingly paid directly into bank accounts to cut costs and decrease the risk of fraud. In order to compensate for this loss of business, the main Crown post offices began offering new commercial services, including pension schemes, travel insurance, bureaux de change, and internet access.⁹⁹ But many of the smaller sub-post offices in rural areas were no longer profitable and had to close.¹⁰⁰

Credit cards, ATMs, and the internet also removed the necessity for high street banks to deal with their customers in person. Customers began to realize that queueless services also had their downside: banks could focus on valued clientele and retreat from any obligation to the wider community. Most banks had introduced telephone banking by the mid-1990s, and online services by the late 1990s. Since these services were disproportionately taken up by the well-off, banks began launching online accounts that cream-skimmed their wealthiest clients and offered them preferential rates. As smaller bank branches closed, queuing up to be served by a cashier was now an outmoded way of getting hold of money. One analyst predicted that soon 'if you want to walk into a branch you will probably have to pay because the profitable customers will mostly be online'.¹⁰¹ By the end of the twentieth century, queuing was increasingly seen as a personal choice in a twenty-four-hour, cashless society. People still had to wait in line for service, of course, or this activity was displaced into other forms of waiting like queuing at cashpoints, traffic jams, and call centres. But there were more opportunities to opt out of the experience of queuing. The socially marginal people who still regularly had to queue (for state benefits, NHS appointments, buses, and post office cashiers) had a further reason to feel marginalized.

Conclusion

The mythology of the British as patient queuers, forged in wartime, still remains. In the millennial anthology *British Greats*, Shyama Perera, an English writer and broadcaster of Sri Lankan descent, argued

⁹⁹ Department of Trade and Industry, *Post Office Reform: A World Class Service for the 21st Century* (London, 1999), 60.

¹⁰⁰ Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit, *Counter Revolution: Modernising the Post Office Network* (London, 2000), 38–9.

¹⁰¹ Robert Winnett, 'Net Banks Save Best Deals For Rich Customers', *The Sunday Times*, 20 February 2000.

that the queue captures 'the timeless essence of the British spirit'. The actual organization of the queue might change—multi-queuing at cashpoints, staggered boarding at airport departure gates, standard line queuing at supermarket checkouts—but the basic notion of egalitarian turn-taking did not. In London's 'multicultural hotchpotch', we sometimes see 'members of more assertive or less organised races trying either to test or to buck the system'. But they soon acknowledge that the queue is 'a totem of patience, practicality and a sense of fair play'.¹⁰² For Perera, our national tradition of queuing exists outside of politics and history: the technology, method, and personnel may vary, but the etiquette is constant.

At the same time, it is often claimed that British queuers have become increasingly impatient and rude in recent years, and that this is a more general sign of the decline of civility in public life. These accounts typically explain the phenomenon of 'queue rage'—the willingness to queue jump or to shout abuse at other people waiting in line—as an effect of an accelerated, 'time-poor' society. As one management psychologist puts it: 'The culture of queuing is changing in Britain. You're becoming more like the Americans—more intolerant, more impatient. We lead increasingly frenetic lives and that freneticism makes us more driven, more time-conscious.'¹⁰³ In the absence of longitudinal studies, this claim is largely unverifiable. Politeness and stoicism are subjective qualities, improvised in the routine acts of daily life, and they leave behind few historical traces. People have been complaining about the disintegration of queue discipline for almost as long as they have been lauding the queue as the essence of British decency—perhaps because the myth carries such symbolic weight that it cannot be sustained by the necessarily messier reality. The notion of queues as the embodiment of fairness and equality has also existed alongside other discourses which have seen them as tedious, unfair, and inefficient.

The celebration of the orderly British queue began not in a more decorous time of courtesy and consideration in public places, but a period of national crisis. As queuing ceased to be an explicitly political issue in the 1950s and 1960s, it became a way of subliminally addressing historical problems through shared daily routines. What had once been held up as an example of the best of the national character could now be seen as symbolic of the 'British disease' at its worst. In the Thatcher era, queuing was increasingly managed and

¹⁰² Shyama Perera, 'Queuing', in Cassell & Co., *British Greats* (London, 2000), 186.

¹⁰³ Professor Cary Cooper quoted in Jo Revill, 'Queue the Irritation', *The Observer*, 26 October 2003; see also David Stewart-David, *The Stressful Queue* (Newcastle, 2003).

technologized. Queue management was promoted as customer-friendly but offered other benefits to companies, including efficiency savings and increased knowledge of consumer behaviour. The changing nature of the queue reflected subtle transformations in the public sphere initiated by the market reforms of Thatcherism. The uneven application of queue management systems, and the persistence of queuing as a signifier of social difference, suggest that it will remain a problematic practice of daily life.