

**When overcoats become umbrellas:
further thought on the democracy of the queue**

Robert J.C. Young

New Statesman 27 Dec. 1941. 'The argument that
the queue system is fair to everybody'.
Quoted in the OED

Something about that casual remark in my November 'New York Poco', added at the last moment, that in the US they call a 'queue' a 'line', has been turning over in my mind ever since. Jakobson would call it an 'interlingual' translation, that is a translation within the same language, and as I offered my quick translation I assumed, on the Jakobsonian model, an exact equivalence between the two. Sometimes, though, many times, as we know, even the exact translation is not exact. Walter Benjamin liked to point out the differences between the German 'brot' and French 'pain', which both designate the same object, bread, but which carry with them an entirely different semantic aura. 'Queue' and 'line' is perhaps more like the translation, at once interlingual and intralingual, we noticed in my class today. We were reading an article by Stephen Slemon, in which, as one of my students pointed out with impressive acumen, he strangely glossed 'portmanteau word' as an 'umbrella term'. Lovers of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* might wonder whether portmanteau words and umbrella terms are in fact the same thing at all, and I feel much the same way about queues and lines. No doubt the oddity of the term queue, and the problem of how to spell it, or pronounce its four contiguous and oddly repeated vowels, has been a major factor in the US preference for the line. The word came into English centuries ago from the French, 'queue', and originally meant 'tail': so the English have a tail instead of a line. Kenneth Tynan's outré 1960s show *Oh Calcutta!* in fact had nothing to do with Calcutta—it was supposed to be a double entendre on *oh quelle queue tu as!* But (unfortunately) Tynan wasn't thinking about queues. Or rather, he was thinking about other kinds of queue.

Unlike most US-English vocabulary differences, for once the English is more direct, because queue can be used as a verb, whereas line requires at least a preposition—line up! More often, though we speak of people making a line, standing in line, or, most frequently, having to stand in line. The implication here is very much that this is something you have to submit yourself to, that you lose in some sense your own power to act as an individual or even as a group at this point. It goes with photographs of apparently disempowered people standing in line for food during the Depression. Perhaps this was what prompted Walter Benjamin rather unattractively to remark that 'the parade-

march of penury, standing in line, is the invention of women'. Queue, on the other hand, has the advantage of being usable as a verb. You may find that you have to queue ('there's a queue!' people remark, usually somewhat aggressively to those who try to ignore it), but at least you can also make a queue, or you can queue up. 'Shall we queue?' If you queue, you remain linguistically and in some broader, important sense an agent, an active subject, part of a particular social consensus about how to behave in a particular situation that requires some measure of equality and fairness to all.

Jean-Paul Sartre has a long and fascinating discussion of the queue in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), where he discusses it as an example of negative serial relations, of individual isolation, of what he calls the 'practico-inert'. His account of the queue, however, makes me think that it would really have been translated more accurately as dealing with 'the line'. Sartre's own alienation from ordinary people as a group, incidentally, is inadvertently revealed much later when he says that if he sees a queue at the bus-stop, he takes the Metro instead. In the English version, improbably, it says he takes the Underground. So it seems as though his horror of queues is such that if he sees one at the bus-stop on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, he rushes off straight to London.

If he had done, he would have found that in England, queues don't work according to his serial model. The extent of the consensus that motivates the queue, and gives it the experience of what Sartre would call the 'fused group', was brought home to me in the immigration hall experience of which I wrote in November. As we, all foreigners and mostly British, stood waiting in the long line for non-US passport holders, a large cheerful looking Englishman, looking slightly dishevelled as though he had just leapt out of bed, rushed up out of nowhere and said

'Do you mind if I queue jump? My daughter is getting married in an hour'. 'Leaving it a bit late', my neighbour remarked tartly—for the plane, after all, had in fact arrived early. But whatever the unfathomable reason for the dishevelled man planning his entry to his daughter's wedding so dramatically at the last moment, everyone, including the Chancellor of Oxford University, let him jump through without objection, and I watched with interest as he moved along the snaking line, repeating his question and explanation, so that he found himself at the head of the queue in less than 60 seconds. The line had been turned into a queue. Sociologists talk about 'the discipline of the queue', but it is not simply a Foucauldian discipline imposed on submissive people from outside. It also works by a kind of self-regulating consensus, and because it is self-regulating it will always potentially make space for the exception, something, it might be argued, that is one of the most characteristic as well as most generous features of British culture. Americans love to laugh at the British and their queues, but that is because when they see them queuing, they only see them standing in line.

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