



## Engineered Delays, Manufactured Inequalities: A Position Paper

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### Abstract

*Delays are far more than simple logistical failures; they constitute a crucial mechanism through which power is exercised and social inequalities are perpetuated. Waiting governs access to essential resources, disproportionately marginalizing vulnerable populations and reinforcing exclusionary practices. This position paper examines three interrelated dimensions: the amplification of socio-economic disparities by delays, the cultural and psychological frameworks shaping their perception, and their deliberate deployment as tools of control across immigration, labor, geopolitical conflicts, and information governance. Time emerges as a contested resource—unequally distributed, strategically manipulated, and weaponized to maintain hierarchies. The exploration invites further research into community resilience amid chronic delays, the dual role of technology in managing waiting times, and cross-cultural differences in tolerance and resistance. Recognizing delays as socially constructed and politically charged phenomena challenges prevailing assumptions and calls for the development of more equitable policies, and institutional practices.*

**Keywords:** Bureaucracy, Control, Delays, Exclusion, Inequality, Logistics, Power, Supply chain, Time.

### Introduction

In July 2023, passengers aboard a Delta flight in Las Vegas were left stranded for over six hours on the tarmac without air conditioning, as cabin temperatures soared past 44°C (111°F), resulting in multiple hospitalizations for heat-related illness. A few months earlier, over 40,000 asylum seekers in the United Kingdom were still awaiting appeal decisions, many of them confined in temporary accommodations with unsanitary conditions and little transparency about their status. At the same time, tech platforms like Uber have refined algorithmic systems that assign wait times based on customer tier—expedited service for premium users, extended

delays for others. These disparate cases reveal a common reality: waiting is no longer a passive inconvenience but an actively orchestrated process. Time is systematically segmented, monetized, and strategically allocated according to individuals' status, mobility, and perceived value, thereby embedding delays within the fundamental operational frameworks of contemporary service delivery, immigration protocols, and digital infrastructures. The questions of who must wait, the duration of their wait, and the conditions under which they do so, serve as indicators of deeper structural inequalities that often remain obscured by bureaucratic procedures, automation, and prevailing narratives of efficiency.

In this regard, delays are far more than mere interruptions of schedules; they are carefully engineered phenomena that both reflect and reproduce entrenched social hierarchies. While cultural attitudes toward waiting may vary—ranging from patient acceptance to frustration and resistance—delays imposed by institutions are rarely accidental. They are mechanisms of control that determine who moves forward and who remains immobilized. Airlines capitalize on waiting through tiered boarding protocols; immigration regimes impose prolonged processing times to regulate movement and discourage entry; corporations delay promotions to maintain hierarchical discipline and organizational control. Such practices reveal that time is not equally distributed—it is a political resource, allocated through strategies that reinforce authority and dependency. As Sharma (2014) contends, time operates as a managed system of governance, while Najafi (2023) echoes Marxist concerns in highlighting its class-based stratification. These orchestrated delays silently reproduce privilege, cloaked in the technical language of capacity, security, or performance. Recognizing delays as structured, intentional, and ideologically loaded challenges prevailing assumptions of neutrality in service systems. They compel us to see waiting as an *infrastructure of power*—one that regulates belonging, access, and opportunity across social, economic, and political landscapes.

This position paper explores how intentionally engineered delays are deeply embedded within complex socio-political structures, where they serve to systematically reinforce and exacerbate vulnerabilities experienced by marginalized groups. Often dismissed as inconveniences or circumstantial setbacks, the delays have significant consequences for individuals with limited resources or few alternatives. What might appear as a simple postponement frequently acts as a crucial tipping point, accelerating social exclusion and compounding hardship. Moreover, cultural and psychological factors profoundly shape how waiting is perceived and managed across different contexts. In some societies, delays are normalized or even ritualized, becoming integral parts of social interaction and collective identity. Conversely, in highly performance-driven environments such as logistics management or public service management, delays are viewed as clear signs of inefficiency or failure. These divergent frameworks influence not only individual tolerance and coping mechanisms but also institutional policies and responses. Ultimately, delays function as deliberate instruments of power, wielded to restrict rights, control labor, and regulate the flow of humanitarian aid and information. As such, waiting emerges as a socially constructed process that reflects and perpetuates structural inequalities, determining who gains access to vital resources and who remains excluded.

## Delays and the Dynamics of Social Inequality

In today's interconnected world, supply chains form the backbone of global commerce, facilitating the flow of goods and resources across diverse regions. Yet these systems are far from neutral technical constructs; they are deeply embedded within complex socio-economic and political landscapes that influence their operation and impact. Ivanov & Dolgui (2020) emphasize that the resilience and viability of intertwined supply networks depend largely on uneven distributions of resources, capabilities, and access among participants. Consequently, delays and disruptions within supply chains often reflect and intensify pre-existing inequalities rather than merely representing logistical inefficiencies. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly exposed these disparities: vaccine distribution disproportionately benefited wealthier nations, while many low-income countries faced restricted access, elevated mortality rates, and prolonged recovery periods (Bayati *et al.*, 2022). Likewise, geopolitical crises such as the war in Ukraine have caused procurement delays that deprive vulnerable populations of essential goods like food and medicine. These are not isolated failures but structural characteristics of a global system shaped by entrenched power imbalances (Schwartz, 1975). The capacity to endure or mitigate delays depends heavily on economic resilience, political leverage, and alternative access, reinforcing divides between those who wait with relative security and those who suffer severe consequences. As Tsing (2009) notes, supply chains do more than mirror social inequalities—they actively perpetuate them.

In this context, the social fabric that binds actors across the supply chain becomes crucial. One key dimension of that fabric is trust—often overlooked in logistical analysis, yet fundamental to how delays are experienced and managed. Trust between supply chain partners significantly improves relationship quality by reducing perceived risks, lowering transaction costs, and enhancing collaborative problem-solving (Çerri, 2012). In fragile or transitioning economies, where formal institutions may offer limited protection, trust serves as an informal yet powerful mechanism for coping with uncertainty—including time-related uncertainty. High-trust relationships can allow for more adaptive responses to delays, whether through shared contingency planning or mutual flexibility in scheduling and resource allocation. Conversely, when trust is absent or fragile, delays become flashpoints that exacerbate tensions, undermine cooperation, and expose weaker actors to intensified harm. This dynamic highlights how delays are not only conditioned by infrastructure or geopolitical disruptions but also by the quality of social and institutional ties that govern supply chain interactions. Recognizing the role of trust enriches our understanding of temporal inequality as both a logistical and relational phenomenon. This relational lens also proves illuminating when considering the everyday consequences of delays beyond high-level supply chain failures.

Beyond systemic supply chain failures such as non-compliance with lead times (Hofbauer & Sangl, 2018), everyday transport delays expose glaring economic and racial inequalities. Low-income individuals dependent on public transit encounter substantial barriers to critical activities—such as employment, education, and healthcare—when faced with delays. In contrast, wealthier populations frequently circumvent these obstacles through private vehicles, ride-hailing services like Uber, or the option to work remotely (Malandri *et al.*, 2021). The disparities extend into air travel: while business travelers may experience only minor inconveniences, migrant workers bear profound emotional and social costs when delays cause

missed family moments, as exemplified by the asylum seekers referenced in the introduction to the position paper. Such contrasts reveal that delays are not only logistical inefficiencies but tangible expressions of entrenched social hierarchies. Acknowledging this unequal burden is essential for rethinking transportation and logistics policies through an equity lens. Policies must recognize the inherent value of time across all social groups and actively work to reduce the disproportionate disadvantages faced by vulnerable populations. As Lucas (2012) emphasizes, mobility inequalities mirror broader societal structures and require comprehensive, justice-driven solutions.

The impact of delays is profoundly shaped by cultural norms and societal perceptions of time, which influence how waiting is experienced and interpreted. A society's conception of waiting not only determines tolerance for delays but also frames them as justifiable or unjust impositions. In many African societies, for instance, waiting is internalized early as a natural constraint or a meaningful rite of passage toward legitimacy and success (Hall, 1973 [1959]). Conversely, in Western contexts, delays are often perceived as infringements on individual rights or clear evidence of mismanagement. This cultural variation critically shapes how consumers and citizens respond emotionally and behaviorally to temporal disruptions. In sensitive supply chains—such as those involving perishable food or essential pharmaceuticals—the way delays are communicated can either reduce anxiety through transparent updates or exacerbate frustration by perpetuating bureaucratic opacity (Yu *et al.*, 2017). Understanding the complex interplay between culture and temporality provides vital insight into delay hierarchies and reveals how perceptions of time connect to broader dynamics of power and control. Earlier research already pointed to the role of cultural temporalities in shaping divergent responses to delay and uncertainty (Chen *et al.*, 2005).

### **Temporalities of Waiting: Culture, Power, and Resistance**

Waiting is profoundly shaped by cultural norms and societal expectations regarding the meaning and use of time. In some cultures, delays are accepted with patience and grace, reflecting a collective and flexible understanding of temporality that values relationships over rigid schedules. Thompson's (2018 [1967]) concept of "temporal discipline" illustrates how industrialized societies impose strict punctuality as a form of social control, in stark contrast to more fluid temporal frameworks found elsewhere. For instance, in many Latin American societies, the unpredictability inherent in daily life normalizes waiting as an integral part of social interaction rather than a source of frustration. Conversely, "*productivist*" societies such as the United States and Germany prioritize operational efficiency and time management, often interpreting delays as failures or personal affronts. These divergent attitudes arise from historical and economic contexts in which industrial capitalism commodifies time as a resource to be optimized. Such cultural differences frequently generate misunderstandings in intercultural encounters, where expectations about punctuality, urgency, and acceptable delay vary widely (Arman & Adair, 2012). Foundational research underscores that cultural temporalities profoundly shape individual and collective responses to waiting, highlighting the importance of cultural competence when managing temporal disruptions (Haynes *et al.*, 2007).

Waiting exerts a profound influence on emotions, shaping individuals' perceptions of fairness and their overall well-being. Central to this experience is the degree of control one

perceives over the delay: a passenger ensnared in unpredictable traffic without any information often succumbs to feelings of anxiety and helplessness, whereas a traveler who receives timely and transparent updates is far more likely to view the wait as manageable and less distressing (Kim & Park, 2016). This insight has prompted industries to implement advanced solutions—such as real-time tracking systems and proactive communication strategies—aimed at alleviating the psychological toll of waiting (Maister, 1985). Beyond logistical considerations, mechanisms like airline priority boarding function as potent symbols of social hierarchy, enabling those with sufficient financial resources to circumvent delays while consigning others to lower status positions (Hui & Tse, 1996). The intertwined psychological and social dimensions reveal waiting not as passive endurance but as an active, multifaceted process, deeply embedded in power dynamics and cultural norms. As such, waiting becomes a lens through which issues of control and agency are laid bare, carrying significant consequences for both individual experience and the fabric of society at large.

In short, waiting should not be dismissed as a passive imposition but rather understood as a productive interval in which new forms of social interaction and organization can spontaneously arise. In numerous urban contexts, individuals enduring prolonged waits for visas or legal proceedings frequently establish informal networks of mutual assistance, thereby creating unexpected social bonds within the temporal gaps carved out by delay (Fagundes, 2017). Consequently, spaces such as asylum seeker centers or food distribution lines transform into critical sites where solidarity is nurtured and where subtle, yet effective, acts of resistance take root. This paradoxical nature of waiting—simultaneously is a tool of domination and a catalyst for temporal and social reconfiguration—reveals how moments of delay challenge established power structures. Whether experienced on an individual or collective level, waiting embodies processes of defiance and renewal, turning periods of apparent inactivity into charged moments of agency and contestation. As Scott's (1985) work on peasant communities compellingly demonstrates, waiting oscillates between submission and resistance, highlighting the intricate relationship between power and temporal experience. This nuanced tension calls for a deeper exploration of how control over time may foster profound and transformative forms of opposition.

### **Delays as Devices of Domination**

As pointed out, delays are not simply accidental disruptions or minor inefficiencies—they operate as calculated mechanisms of social ordering, embedded in broader systems of governance and control. Their impact reaches beyond logistical concerns: delays structure power relations, generate asymmetries, and shape access to both material and immaterial resources. Three key configurations illustrate the underlying perspective. First, in migratory and labor contexts, delays act as disciplinary tools—slowing individual trajectories, undermining bargaining positions, and reinforcing implicit hierarchies of mobility and worth. Second, in situations of crisis or geopolitical conflict, delays function as strategic levers of control. Postponing humanitarian aid, obstructing information flows, or suspending intervention serves to exert pressure without resorting to overt force. Third, in digital environments, delays are embedded within technical architectures that regulate access to services, visibility, and data. These temporal asymmetries, often imperceptible, reflect an emerging form of algorithmic governmentality that quietly reinforces social stratification. Examining the varied modes of

temporal manipulation reveals that delays are not passive, but rather central mechanisms in the reproduction of contemporary inequalities—mechanisms that demand critical scrutiny across both institutional and technological domains.

(1) Delays are more than logistical hiccups; they function as deliberate mechanisms of power that reinforce existing hierarchies and limit access to critical resources. In immigration systems, bureaucratic slowdowns act as subtle barriers disproportionately affecting marginalized groups, restricting their freedom of movement. Lengthy asylum processes or visa restrictions implicitly communicate that mobility is a privilege rather than a universal right, as demonstrated in Lee *et al.*'s (2018) analysis of international students' challenges with South African visa policies. Similarly, in labor contexts, employers exploit delays strategically—prolonging negotiations, withholding wage payments, or deferring promotions—to undermine workers' bargaining power. These tactics reflect Rosa's (2010, 2013) concept of temporal power, whereby time is weaponized to coerce compliance and maintain socio-political inequalities. Such engineered delays perpetuate cycles of vulnerability and exclusion, limiting opportunities for advancement. In line with this, Esping-Andersen (2014) argues that temporal mechanisms embedded within welfare regimes systematically produce and reproduce social stratification, highlighting how bureaucratic inertia and procedural delays serve to entrench inequalities rather than mitigate them.

(2) Delays extend far beyond logistical (technical) friction; they are intentionally mobilized as instruments of control within geopolitical arenas and informational governance. In crisis zones, the deliberate postponement of humanitarian assistance—such as withholding food, medicine or fuel—becomes a coercive tactic, exerting pressure on vulnerable populations and serving broader political objectives. The blockade of essential goods in regions like the Gaza Strip starkly illustrates how temporal manipulation can be weaponized to destabilize communities and extract compliance (Buheji & Hasan, 2024). Equally in the digital sphere, regimes curtail public agencies by throttling Internet speeds or withholding information, shaping narratives and stifling dissent. In this context, waiting is not accidental but profoundly strategic. Brickell (2024) examines how the slow violence of debt and indebtedness during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among garment workers and marginalized communities, manifests not only as economic strain but also as engineered temporal suffering. These orchestrated delays exemplify what Sartre termed a form of domination through time (Lievens, 2022), revealing how control over temporal flows becomes a subtle yet powerful mode of social coercion—deepening global inequalities and reshaping political relations.

(3) Delays are finally not mere inefficiencies but tools of domination, revealing deep asymmetries in how time is experienced and weaponized. In societies valuing immediacy, governments, tech platforms, and corporations strategically use delays to reinforce power. These are deliberate interventions managing information flows, service access, and algorithmic exposure. Recent insights highlight that digital infrastructures increasingly rely on temporal asymmetries to control user access and reinforce hierarchies (Castaneda *et al.*, 2024). For her part, Tazzioli (2020) shows that temporal control now extends beyond spatial restrictions to choreographed rhythms of access and opacity, creating a “temporal governmentality” disciplining subject invisibly. Waiting thus normalizes control, masking intentions behind seemingly technical decisions. Consequences include delayed access to public services, social

media visibility, or benefits, all used to influence behavior and perceptions. Such calculated temporal asymmetries demand ethical scrutiny, especially regarding algorithmic opacity and concentrated temporal power. Understanding how technical systems and social regulation interact is crucial to expose how modern societies manufacture docility through time manipulation—often unnoticed by those affected.

## Conclusion

Delays should not be regarded solely as incidental breakdowns within logistical or bureaucratic systems; rather, they constitute fundamental components of economic, political, and social architecture. They expose persistent inequalities by delineating who is compelled to wait and who retains the power to determine timing. This position paper has underscored how delays disproportionately afflict the most vulnerable populations, thereby reinforcing entrenched hierarchies of access and control. Far from neutral or accidental, waiting is a highly structured experience, shaped by the temporal regimes imposed by institutional authorities—the so-called “*masters of time*.” In an era of profound global interconnectedness, where supply chains and administrative processes govern daily existence, these engineered delays intensify disparities in mobility, consumption, and opportunity. Reconceiving delays as deliberate, strategic mechanisms invites a more critical examination of justice, governance, and access in contemporary society. This perspective compels policymakers and corporate stakeholders alike to devise targeted strategies aimed at dismantling systems that externalize the burden of waiting onto marginalized groups. Recognizing time as a contested resource embedded in structural inequalities is essential for fostering more ethical and inclusive frameworks of distribution.

Building on this foundation, future research should explore how delays can be resisted, restructured, or mitigated. Across diverse contexts, communities frequently develop informal strategies—mutual aid, alternative infrastructures, and temporal shortcuts—that counteract institutional inefficiencies and embody forms of everyday resilience. Such practices warrant thorough investigation as expressions of quiet resistance and adaptation. Moreover, the expanding role of technology in shaping temporal regimes—through automation, algorithmic control, and selective transparency—raises pressing questions about emergent modes of temporal governmentality. Cross-cultural and economic comparative studies could illuminate varied experiences and responses to waiting, revealing both its structural roots and symbolic meanings. Psychological and social dimensions, including emotional reactions to imposed delays, also demand closer scrutiny, as they inform individual and collective agencies. Ultimately, approaching delays as engineered phenomena opens critical pathways for research into exclusion, compliance, and innovation. Such insights pave the way for developing more equitable models of management, service delivery, and participation—advancing both scholarly discourse and practical reform.

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