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A State of Limbo: The politics of waiting in neo-liberal Latvia[1]

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Abstract

This article presents an ethnographic study of politics of waiting in a post-Soviet context. While activation has been explored in sociological and anthropological literature as a neo-liberal governmental technology and its application in post-socialist context has also been compellingly documented, waiting as a political artefact has only recently been receiving increased scholarly attention. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at a state-run unemployment office in Riga, this article shows how, alongside activation, state welfare policies also produce passivity and waiting. Engaging with the small but developing field of sociological literature on the politics of waiting, I argue that, rather than interpreting it as a clash between 'neo-liberal' and 'Soviet' regimes, we should understand the double-move of activation and imposition of waiting as a key mechanism of neo-liberal biopolitics. This article thus extends the existing theorisations of the temporal politics of neo-liberalism.

Keywords: Politics of waiting; activation; post-socialism; Latvia; unemployment; neo-liberal biopolitics

Introduction

Sociologists have demonstrated how social deployments of time are linked to power relations (Schwartz 1975; Zerubavel 1979; Bourdieu 2000). Movement and waiting, activity and passivity, are embodied temporal states that are often politically charged. Thus, governmentality studies show how 'an active individual' is at the centre of the neo-liberal political project (Foucault 2008; Rose and Miller 1992; Rose 1999; Dean 1995, 1999; Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996; Read 2009; Brown 2003; Ong 2006). However, there is increasing focus in sociological and anthropological literature on the kinds of zones of limbo that are produced by neo-liberal politics for such social groups as migrants, asylum seekers, the poor, or the indigenous (Bayart 2007; Jeffrey 2010; Povinelli 2011; Auyero 2012).[2] Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at an unemployment office in Latvia, this article examines politics of waiting in post-Soviet neo-liberalism. Latvia is a particularly intriguing case for studying such temporal politics, not only because it is a country that has been undertaking radical neo-liberal restructuring since 1991[3] but also due to the prolonged pre-occupation with the passivity and docility of the post-Soviet citizen in the Latvian political imagination. Such passivity is framed as an unfortunate heritage of the socialist past, problematized[4] in the expert discourse as 'learned helplessness' (see e.g. Muižnieks 1995; Norgaard, Ostrovska and Hansen 2000; Tabuns 2008; Mieriņa 2011, 2014). In order to 'catch up with Europe' and establish a 'modern' liberal democratic society, this reform rhetoric goes, Latvians have had to unlearn their 'learned helplessness'.[5] Welfare policies have been one of the central avenues for the Latvian state's efforts at reconfiguring political subjectivities and seeking to produce dispositions and behaviours that are imagined as fitting with the post-Soviet

politico-economic order. In this article, I focus on one specific area of welfare assistance, namely programmes for people out of work. The unemployed person is a disruptive figure in neo-liberal capitalism, with her perceived inactivity endangering the imagined moral style and bodily disposition of the modern citizen.[6]

My fieldwork revealed an apparent paradox in the governmental tactics of the post-Soviet Latvian state. Specifically, while the welfare programmes for the unemployed reflected the state's efforts at moulding entrepreneurial subjects, waiting was at the same time ubiquitous at the unemployment office. Many were waiting for hours to register or see an employment agent, but many more were put on waiting lists for months or even years to attend a computer literacy course or to re-qualify. Rather than interpreting this waiting as a manifestation of 'Soviet mentality', as civil servants and policy makers often did, the goal of this article is to show how state policies imposed both physical and virtual waiting on the unemployed individuals and thus perpetuated the passivity that they were allegedly battling. Even though this waiting stood in a stark contrast to the rhetoric of the welfare programmes, both were administered by the state. This counterintuitive co-existence of activation and imposition of waiting begs a question. If the state's efforts are directed at activating its labour force and undoing the 'learned helplessness', how to make sense of policies that at the same time kept the unemployed passively waiting?

The purpose of this article is to offer a conceptualisation of the temporality of neo-liberalism as one where policy efforts to activate individuals *co-exist* in a strategic fit with incapacitating waiting. I argue that this seemingly paradoxical combination of activation and making people wait is in fact at the heart of the kind of welfare regime that has taken shape in this particular post-Soviet context. I use ethnographic data to show

how the two temporalities are co-deployed and through what specific policies and institutional practices such a dual temporal regime functions. This article integrates insights from the recently emerging sociology of waiting and extends the existing theorizations by arguing that, rather than interpreting it as a clash between 'neo-liberal' and 'Soviet' regimes, we should understand the double-move of activation and imposition of waiting as a key mechanism of neo-liberal biopolitics.

The paper is structured as follows. First I outline the key areas of literature and define the key concepts. I then demonstrate with ethnographic data how this co-existence of activation and waiting played out on the ground. Here, ethnographic vignettes are presented to show how ideas of 'activity' and 'waiting' were problematized by the civil servants and trainers who worked with the unemployed, how these notions were implicated in the process of negotiating political subjectivities in post-Soviet neo-liberalism, and how waiting was produced through the ways the social assistance programmes were structured. The paper concludes with a discussion of the two-pronged neo-liberal biopolitics in the context of stigmatization of social rights.

Theorizing activity and waiting in neo-liberalism

Activity has been theorized as a key element of neo-liberal capitalism in sociological literature. If we understand capitalism as not only – or primarily – a system of institutionalized economic relations but as much 'a collective psycho-moral disposition', then we can recognize that its existence as an economic and cultural system depends on shared 'bodily disposition[s]', 'sensibilit[ies]', and 'moral style[s]' (Appadurai 2011: 519). In the contemporary – neo-liberal – form of capitalism, the required bodily

disposition displays activity and movement and the appropriate moral style is expressed through responsibility and striving. As Boltanski and Chiapello point out in their analysis of contemporary capitalism, ‘To be doing something, to move, to change – this is what enjoys prestige, as against stability, which is often regarded as synonymous to inaction’ (2005: 155; see also Harvey in Verdery 1996: 57).

The model of an active, entrepreneurial individual has been theorized extensively in the Foucauldian tradition (Foucault 2008; Rose and Miller 1992; Rose 1999; Dean 1995, 1999; Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996; Read 2009; Brown 2003; Ong 2006). Active, entrepreneurial citizens are key to the neo-liberal – or advanced liberal – mode of governance and responsibilisation and activation are key governmental technologies here (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996; Rose 1996, 1999). Exemplifying this emphasis on activity and individual responsibility, welfare assistance in contemporary neo-liberal regimes[7] is frequently reconfigured into what is variedly called ‘active labour market policies’, ‘activation’ programmes, ‘workfare’, or ‘welfare-to-work’ programmes (Wacquant 2010, 2012; Greer and Symon 2014[8]). Application of such neo-liberal techniques of activation in post-socialist context has also been compellingly documented (Yurchak 2002; Dunn 2004, 2005; Zigon 2010, 2011; Ozoliņa 2010; Matza 2012; Baar 2012).

Waiting as a political artefact is at the centre of a number of recent studies. Thus, Craig Jeffrey explores in his book *Timepass* how the shortage of employment opportunities, emerging as one of the effects of global neo-liberalisation, makes particular social groups in India ‘durably unable to realise their goals’ and thus creates ‘cultures of limbo’ (2010: 2-3). Jeffrey’s study highlights especially well the geopolitics

of waiting, as developing countries are constantly in 'the "waiting room of history": a permanent state of "not now, not yet"' (Chakrabarty cited in Jeffrey 2010: 12). Javier Auyero's recent ethnography *Patients of the State* (2012) examines welfare provision in Argentina. Auyero places his study in the context of '[t]hree decades of neo-liberal economic policy' (2012: 36), which have caused, among other, a steep rise in unemployment levels. He contends that these various forms of waiting, such as lines at a welfare office or having to wait months for a particular welfare benefit, are 'temporal processes in and through which political subordination is reproduced' (2012: 2). His ethnography reveals how, through various forms of 'manipulation of poor people's time […] the state creates docility among the poor' and turns them into patients of the state (2012: 157).[9]

Each of these bodies of literature – the studies of neo-liberal activation and the recent scholarship documenting waiting – show how particular temporalities (activity or passivity, movement or waiting) are politically shaped. These studies, however, focus on *either* the politics of activation *or* of waiting. The purpose of this article, as suggested above, is to examine a case where these two political technologies are *co-deployed*. Such co-existence of activation and waiting has been noted by Jean-Francois Bayart in his macro-level study of global capitalism, *Global Subjects* (2007). According to him, 'the essential paradox of globalization lies in this contradiction between economic and financial openness on the one side and, on the other, the coercive compartmentalization of the international labour market and the obstacles placed in the way of the circulation of people' (2007: 277–8). Speaking of various groups of disadvantaged people – prisoners,

labour migrants, asylum seekers, who are all relegated to passive waiting in spaces like detention centres and refugee camps – Bayart (2007: 267) notes that

> the study of the techniques of body by which we constitute ourselves as 'moral subjects' of globalisation leaves us with a paradox. The latter is deemed to be all acceleration and urgency. None the less, it inculcates a huge discipline of waiting in us.

This article aims to show how this co-existence of 'acceleration and urgency' and 'discipline of waiting' works empirically and argues that it is not merely a paradox, as Bayart muses, but rather a central *mechanism of neo-liberal biopolitics*.

Unemployment office as a symptomatic space: ethnographic site and method

The argument of this paper is built on the basis of eight months of ethnographic fieldwork at an unemployment office in Riga – one of the branch offices of the Latvian Employment Agency, an institution operating under the Ministry of Welfare. As I began my fieldwork in 2011, the country was recovering from yet another wave of austerity politics. The Latvian government had opted for harsh austerity policies and a loan from the International Monetary Fund to cope with the recent economic crisis. The GDP had dropped by 25 per cent between 2008 and 2010, while unemployment rose to 20.7 per cent at its peak in the 1st quarter of 2010 (Eurostat data cited by the Latvian Ministry of Welfare 2011a). Some analysts estimate the number of workplaces in the national economy shrunk from 920,000 to 710,000 as a result of the crisis and the ensuing austerity politics (Ošlejs 2012). Salaries had been slashed for many public sector

employees by up to a third. Unemployment in October 2011, at the beginning of my fieldwork, stood at 16.2 per cent and there were 43 job seekers per vacancy. Every month more people were coming to the unemployment office to apply for benefits and look for assistance in finding new employment.

I have selected the unemployment office as a fieldwork site because I believe it is what Ann Laura Stoler calls 'a symptomatic space in the craft of governance' (Stoler 2009: 7). It is symptomatic of the kind of political ontology[10] that prevails in this post-socialist society. In state socialism, workers were supposed to be the revolutionary class and lead the rest of the society into the 'eternal sunshine' of communism (Lampland 1995; Bonnell 1997: 20–63). While the socialist state provided work, or benefits in case of inability to work, as a right, in neo-liberal capitalism the unemployed person is a disruptive figure. This state-funded institution, where individuals turn when they have lost work, is one of the key points of encounter of historically and geopolitically situated discourses of the state and personhood – as well as of work, virtue, and welfare.

Between September 2011 and April 2012, I conducted participant observation of one particular programme for the unemployed, called 'Competitiveness-Raising Activities' ('Konkurētspējas paaugstināšanas pasākumi' in Latvian). This programme consists of 1–4 day seminars on a range of topics (introduced in more detail below). I was granted access to participate in these seminars and to speak to the trainers who ran them and the people out of work who attended them.[11] The methodological approach of this study is rooted in an interpretive tradition of studying the state ethnographically (Gupta 1995, 2005; Haney 2002; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Sharma and Gupta 2006; Auyero 2012). In line with this approach, my focus was on investigating *social policies* as well as

institutional practices through which these policies are implemented and manifest themselves in everyday life (Haney 2002). Such an approach thus gives access to observe how a *political ontology* is enacted in practice and how specific *political subjectivities* are rehearsed in everyday encounters between state agents and ordinary citizens.

Rhetoric of activation

It was a couple of minutes before 9am as I arrived at the Riga unemployment office. I had come to attend a seminar called 'Overcoming psychological barriers in the job search process', organized as part of the 'Competitiveness-Raising' programme for people out of work. People were arriving and sitting down around a large rectangle of tables in silence. The seminars usually started at 9am and lasted until 3pm. It was part of their purpose, as one civil servant explained to me, to make people get up early in the morning, render themselves presentable, and get out of the house. This way, it was hoped, they would not lose motivation and sink into depression while without a job. Often the training would end earlier because people preferred to skip the lunch break, save money on food and get home sooner. The light and spacious room was located on the 3rd floor of the unemployment office. There was a whiteboard on one of the walls and a big banner of the Employment Agency propped up in the corner to the left of the board. The banner exhibited photographs of a large group of good-looking, well-dressed people, their figures together forming the shape of Latvia. The slogan of the Agency, 'I know. I do. I can' (*Gribu. Daru. Varu*), was written at their feet.

This day's seminar would be led by Juris[12], a middle-aged psychologist who had been working for the Employment Agency since 1996. He was also a career counsellor at

the Agency and read lectures in career consulting at a university. After twelve people had arrived and taken their seats in silence, Juris introduced himself, asked others to do the same, and explained the purpose of the day. While various barriers existed to finding work, he was here to help with overcoming those that ‘existed in one’s head’, he said to the timid audience of mostly women. He could not help with social barriers, like having to care for someone at home, or economic barriers, like being unable to afford new shoes to go to a job interview. Clarifications out of the way, he opened with a question, gazing at the women with his eyes wide open in a slightly exaggerated way: ‘What is a human being made of?’ Juris spoke in a friendly manner, his narrative was scattered with little jokes, doing his best to put people at ease. But the audience was still difficult to liven up. A woman in her 40s, who had been unemployed for several years, finally uttered shyly, ‘Feelings…’ Another participant suggested emotions. Not having received the answers he was looking for, Juris went on to present his model, ‘conceived among psychologists, psychiatrists, and clergymen at a conference in St. Petersburg’. Writing on the whiteboard, Juris explained that the human being consisted of flesh, soul, and spirit. As a psychologist, he noted his particular interest in the soul. The human soul, he would explain, consisted of reason, emotions, and will. Only if these three were aligned, could action follow. And action was what he believed his audiences needed most. In his seminars, Juris liked to cite a saying ‘You have to keep moving, in spite of everything!’

During the eight months of my fieldwork, I joined many such groups of ten to fifteen people where we would learn how to identify our strengths by working with lists of verbs and adjectives, how to set goals in life, and how to communicate effectively with others. The trainers helped people devise psychological coping strategies for finding new

employment and advised them of the social networks that could be mobilised to assist in this process. Some trainers engaged the unemployed in practicing specific bodily techniques, such as breathing to reduce stress, while sitting in a circle. The entrepreneurship seminars encouraged people to dream big and start their own business. The trainers liked to remind their audiences that 'nobody would pour it into your mouth' or 'hand it to you on a plate'. Others were less euphemistic and declared 'Stop waiting, nobody's going to help you!' Anete, a psychologist in her late 20s, liked to cite NIKE's slogan in English, 'Just do it!' She summarized her one-day seminar on preparing for a job interview by drawing three letters on the whiteboard: 'R! R!! R!!!' The 'R' stood for 'Rīcība', or 'Action'. A self-acknowledged enthusiast of neuro-linguistic programming, she dictated to her audience word by word, 'The–way–I–live–today–is–a–result–of–what–I–did–and–thought–yesterday.'

The Latvian Ministry of Welfare describes the 'Competitiveness-Raising' programme as designed for 'learning job search skills, [receiving] psychological support, and learning the basic skills and abilities necessary for the labour market' (2011b: 22). While there were many different topics on offer, the majority of them fit within the two main categories. The first one targeted 'social and civic skills', and was aimed particularly at 'becoming aware of one's individuality' and developing interactional skills.[13] Apart from the seminar on overcoming psychological barriers in the job search process, other popular topics, judging by attendance numbers, were 'Stress and How to Overcome It', 'Conflict and Effective Communication', 'Raising Self-Confidence', and 'Ability to Work in Times of Change'. The second main group of seminars were meant to develop 'self-initiative and entrepreneurship' skills. At the time of my fieldwork, the

most popular topics were ‘How to Start a Small Business’, ‘Writing a Business Plan’, ‘Being a Self-Employed Person’, and ‘Accounting Skills for Self-Employed Persons’.

Nearly 5,000 ‘competitiveness-raising’ seminars on 43 different topics took place in Latvia over the course of the year 2011. Fifty-two thousand unemployed individuals had attended at least one seminar that year. As the number of unemployed in the country was fluctuating between 130,000 and 160,000, this was the largest welfare programme for the unemployed in terms of participation numbers, involving every third registered job seeker.[14] By comparison, other programmes such as the three-month long training courses on computer literacy, English, or other skills commonly required in the labour market, had involved only 26,000 people. Only about a third of all the people registered as out of work were receiving monetary benefits at any given time, due to strict eligibility criteria. These statistics highlight the policy priorities in the neo-liberal welfare regime, as the emphasis was placed on activation and psychological empowerment[15] classes while deprioritising other forms of welfare assistance such as vocational training, work placements, or monetary benefits. The table below shows the participation numbers in these and other programmes between 2010 and 2014.

Table I: *Overview of unemployment rates and active labour market programmes in Latvia, 2010–2014.*

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Unemployment rate (%)	19.5	16.2	15.0	11.9	10.8
Number of people registered as unemployed	161,000–194,000	130,000–164,000	104,000–133,000	89,000–107,000	80,000–93,000
'Competitiveness-Raising Activities' (number of participants)	59,000	52,000	66,000	109,000*	81,000
'Work practice programme'** (number of participants)	53,000	32,000	31,000	32,000	19,200
3-months 'informal' training (number of participants)	44,000	26,000	15,000	21,000	15,400
9-months vocational training (number of participants)	13,000	9,700	8,400	8,600	4,700

Sources: Eurostat (2015) and Latvian Employment Agency (2015).

* The significant rise in the number of participants in 2013 is due to new counting rules.

** A programme introduced after the 2008 crisis as a safety-net measure. Funded by the European Social Fund, it usually involved doing unskilled labour for a local municipality in exchange for a monthly stipend.

Politics of waiting

While the audiences at the 'competitiveness-raising' seminars rehearsed 'active' disposition towards life, it became increasingly apparent over the course of the fieldwork that other forms of state action at the same time produced physical and virtual stillness. To begin with, the spatial and temporal order of the unemployment office stood in stark contrast to the incessant activity advocated by the trainers. It was saturated with waiting. The waiting started with the registration process, as one usually had to spend hours in the waiting area just for personal details to be entered into the electronic data system. After this formal process was complete, the job seekers usually had to wait around two months for the first meeting with their designated employment agent. Even though these appointments were scheduled for specific times, there were always people lining the narrow corridors at the unemployment office, sitting idly, waiting. Some had come late or without an appointment, hoping they might get in. Sometimes the schedule overran and everyone had to wait. Among the staff and 'clients' alike, conversations and comments focusing on 'the queue' were ubiquitous. Distinctions were commonly made between 'morning queues' and 'afternoon queues', 'average queues', 'live queues' and 'queues by appointment'. A printed A4 note on one of the career councillor's doors announced: 'Admittance according to the order of queue!' ('Pieņem rindas kārtībā'), a phrase that was reminiscent of a Soviet-era polyclinic. Passive waiting was thus created and controlled by the spatial and temporal organization of welfare assistance.

The seminar trainers would tell their audiences that unemployment was 'hard work', explaining that one had to split the time every day between looking for a new job and improving oneself. Yet, their time was treated as if without value by being made to

spend hours in the waiting rooms and corridors of the unemployment office. The fact that these spaces were often dilapidated and without basic amenities (e.g. I never saw toilet paper or soap in the toilets, some of which could not even be locked) added to this sense of worthlessness. Inna, a 60-year old woman and frequent participant of the 'competitiveness-raising' seminars, complained to me that she saw no point in having to sit around for hours on end in the corridor when the appointment with her employment agent amounted to little more than a couple of clicks through the same electronic database of vacancies on the agent's computer that Inna was already using at home. Yet, if she missed the mandatory appointment without a valid excuse, her official 'status' as an unemployed person might be withdrawn. The consequence of that would be the loss of the meagre unemployment benefits and any possibility to take part in the active labour market programmes.

While the visible idleness around the corridors and waiting rooms stood in ironic contrast to the rhetoric delivered within the seminar rooms, there were other forms of waiting that were entirely invisible but, arguably, with even more significant consequences for individuals. Not only were there long delays for appointments with employment agents, but the very implementation of many of the active labour market programmes was also structured around waiting. When a person registered as unemployed, they were usually encouraged to take part in the 'competitiveness-raising' seminars as well as being invited to sign up for a twelve-week training programme or a nine-month requalification course. While only the seminars were available right away, it was common knowledge that one would have to wait for an indefinite amount of time until one's turn came to be offered any of the other assistance programmes. The longer

training programmes were popular among job seekers as they were seen to increase opportunities for new employment and some of them entitled one to a small stipend (approx. 80 to 100 Lats or 100 to 125 British pounds per month at the time of my fieldwork). With the unemployment benefits reducing every three months, until their payment stopped after nine months in total, this was a promise of at least some form of income for many individuals living without wages.[16]

Several of my informants had been waiting for months and, in some cases, over an entire year to obtain a place on a computer skills or English course. None of the people I spoke to had been able to participate right away, as there was always a backlog of thousands of others who were already in line. My informants would routinely recount how many months or even years they had been waiting on one or another programme or appointment, comparing their waiting time to those of their relatives or acquaintances. Furthermore, waiting was a formal criterion for eligibility in the case of some of the active labour market programmes. One was only allowed to enrol on a number of such programmes after having been unemployed for a certain number of months. Thus, there was a six-month waiting time before becoming eligible for a mobility assistance programme, public works programme, and a course on writing business proposals.[17]

The long queues for training courses offered to the unemployed as part of welfare assistance have been a persistent phenomenon in Latvia since the 1990s. As a report from 1998 observed, 'Although a few unemployed respondents expressed reluctance to embark on learning a new profession in the present economic situation, those who [were] willing reported serious difficulties' (Dudwick et al. 1998: 17). It gave an example of Liepāja, the third largest city in Latvia, where, of the 1000–1500 people who annually applied for

training, only a fraction received the opportunity (e.g. in 1997, 347 people participated in various training programmes). The same report noted that those who undertook training had a higher chance of subsequently finding employment (1998). In 2000, only 36.6 per cent of the 28,000 unemployed who applied for a re-qualification course across the country gained entrance. The rest had officially remained 'in line'. At the time of my fieldwork, there were approximately 9,000 people 'in line' for training in Riga, which was estimated by employment agents to amount to a nine-month wait.

This evidence suggests that, alongside the rhetoric of activation, *the very manner in which welfare provision to the unemployed is organized perpetuates passivity and waiting*. Registering job seekers for training programmes and then failing to allocate sufficient resources to provide the training, means that those who could become more productive participants of the labour market are instead kept in a state of limbo. While the trainers emphasize activity, such organization of these programmes produces waiting and makes the unemployed, especially those with out-dated qualifications, 'durably unable to realise their goals' (Jeffrey 2010: 3). A seemingly plausible explanation of such long waiting times could be scarcity of resources. Indeed, I am not arguing that it was a deliberate policy of the Latvian government, the Ministry of Welfare, or the Employment Agency to keep people waiting. The head of the Employment Agency readily attributed the problem of the long waiting lists for the courses to insufficient funding.[18] Due to the austerity budget following the 2008 crisis, the Agency had to further reduce staff costs and employment agents were made to take involuntary holidays while the number of the unemployed in the country was increasing. Scarcity of resources cannot serve as a sufficient explanation in itself, however. Rather, it reflects policy priorities and – more

broadly – the kind of political ontology that underpins the welfare governance.[19] If we regard any welfare regime as a two-layered system consisting of *redistributive* and *interpretive* apparatuses (Haney 2002: 175), we can recognize that redistribution of resources reflects the way that policy makers interpret social rights and entitlements. I therefore argue that such organization of welfare that makes the most vulnerable wait indefinitely is an outcome of neo-liberal welfare reforms implemented by the Latvian government since the early 1990s and intensified during the second wave of austerity following the 2008 crisis. The neo-liberal restructuring has meant reconfiguring social assistance and shrinking the welfare budget. The Latvian welfare state has been characterized in scholarly literature as particularly 'lean and mean', compared to other former socialist countries (Vanhuysse 2009: 60). Indeed, Latvia, along with the other two Baltic States, has been spending the least proportion of GDP on social protection, compared not only to West European countries but also to the rest of the former socialist states in Europe. Social security spending accounted for just 14 per cent of GDP in 2012, compared to 29.5 per cent in the EU28 (Eurostat 2015). Even in the pre-crisis period of 2000–2008, when the national GDP was growing rapidly by 6–10 per cent per year, the social protection expenditure as a share of GDP was steadily decreasing. It is evident that social security and alleviation of poverty have not been government priorities (Lāce 2012: 105, 112; Rajevska 2009), while the welfare programmes that remain are reconfigured as psychological activation rather than tangible assistance, such as benefits or vocational training for re-qualification. As a result, many of the most vulnerable individuals in society are kept in a limbo.

Waiting and expecting in post-socialism

This neo-liberal paradox of activation and waiting gains an extra dimension in the post-Soviet context because of the historically and geopolitically formed moral valuations of the different temporalities at stake. While thousands of unemployed individuals were waiting for appointments and courses, they were stigmatized by civil servants and trainers because their waiting was framed as demonstrating their 'Soviet mentality'. Queuing for basic foodstuff and household goods is still 'the living image of the Soviet way of life' (Sinyavsky in Pesmen 2000: 30; see also Nikolaev 2000, 2005).[20] Waiting in lines was among many of the practices that contributed to the state's claim upon people's private time in the Soviet Union. Katherine Verdery has argued that in the socialist system, such 'seizures of time' … 'were basic to producing subjects who would not see themselves as independent agents' (Verdery 1996: 56).[21] In post-Soviet Latvia, waiting is linked in the popular imagination to a state socialist political ontology where the state is 'a father who gives hand-outs to the children as he sees fit' (1996: 25). The citizens are imagined in this model as expecting these hand-outs and passively waiting for them.

This Soviet political ontology resonates particularly strongly in the second meaning that the verb 'to wait' – 'gaidīt' – has in Latvian. Namely, 'gaidīt' can also mean 'to expect'. This second meaning was invoked in an exchange between a broad-shouldered, middle-aged man and an employment agent at the registration room. Upon reaching the end of the brief registration process, the man said in an agitated tone that he had been working hard and paying taxes for many years, and now, having lost a job, was expecting some help from the state. The agent did not engage in a conversation with him and continued with the strictly scripted process of entering the man's personal data into

the electronic database. However, after he had left, she remarked loudly to the other colleagues and myself in the room that such a strong man, 'a man like an oak-tree' ('vīrs kā ozols'), should just 'go out there and work', instead of waiting for assistance from the state. His *claim for social rights* was *interpreted as passive reliance on the state*. Demands for social rights were similarly delegitimised in the 'competitiveness-raising' seminars when trainers denounced them as mere 'waiting' or labelled them as 'out-dated'. Associations with the Soviet waiting are seen as interfering with the efforts of summoning new, decidedly *post*-socialist subjectivities.[22]

Due to these connotation, the trainers and civil servants either refused to recognize their clients' waiting or stigmatized it as 'Soviet' or 'out-dated'. Thus, waiting was often made invisible with the help of language. A high-ranking employee at Riga's unemployment centre stumbled over the word 'line' when she explained to me how the active labour market policies worked. Immediately after mentioning that there was a line for the courses, she corrected herself that it was not actually a line but rather people's names were put 'on a list.' The official went on to say that whenever 'a client' would tell her that they were 'waiting in line' for a course, she would point out to them that they were not 'in line' and were not 'waiting for anything'. They simply had a queue number. Mentioning of lines was often avoided at the registration waiting room as well. A staff member handing out queue numbers for registration used to say in a euphemistic manner: 'You can go walk around for about two [or three, or four] hours', estimating the waiting time for that person but avoiding to refer to what they would have to do as waiting.

When the state of limbo in which many of the unemployed lived surfaced in the interactions between state agents and citizens, it was routinely framed by the former as an

individual failure to embrace an active disposition towards life. For example, during a seminar on job interviews, a discussion arose regarding different channels to explore when looking for work. Aina, a trainer with a psychology degree, asked the group, 'So what would the Employment Agency be good for?' Silence fell upon the room. 'What do you think?' she insisted. After more silence, Aina gave the answer herself, preceded by a slight reprimand: 'You don't even know! For the courses!' She continued, 'People say, "I'm not being offered anything." But let me tell you, don't wait to be offered anything. Go search for yourself, go apply for yourself!' One of the participants, a man in his 20's that had worked as a builder in Ireland but returned to be with his young family, perked up, 'But where can I find out? I've been waiting for a month!' Another seminar participant turned to him with reproach: 'A month! Others have been waiting for two years already!' Hearing this dialogue, Aina energetically intervened: 'That is negligence, to be waiting for two years! In that case it's one's own fault. If you only wait and wait and wait and don't ask for yourselves then it can happen'. She then admitted, however, that it might indeed be the case that one had to wait a year for the most popular courses. The symbolic violence of keeping vulnerable citizens in limbo was doubled when civil servants and seminar trainers failed to recognize the systemic nature of the problems people were experiencing and blamed the unemployed for waiting passively.

Conclusion

In these 'cold, neo-liberal times',[23] one is not supposed to sit around idly and wait. Constant movement and activity is the norm. At the same time, neo-liberal politics across the globe relegate many to waiting. Movement in the contemporary world is a privilege

disguised as the norm. In this article, I have argued that we need to adjust our view of neo-liberalism as an ideology of *homo economicus*, entrepreneurial citizenship and activation and recognize how powerless, indefinite waiting is a key part of this form of governance. Indeed, the ethnographic data have demonstrated how the politics of activation and waiting are co-deployed in a single institutional space. On the one hand, the civil servants and trainers seek to instil an enterprising ethic while on the other waiting is engrained in the welfare policies. This article thus extends the existing theorization of temporalities of neo-liberalism by showing with the help of ethnographic data how both activation and waiting are co-deployed in this mode of governance.

As the Latvian state has been channelling its policy efforts towards 'catching up with Europe' and investing national and EU resources into fostering entrepreneurial citizenship, its welfare system has been refocused on 'competitiveness-raising' via active labour market programmes (as the title of the welfare programme investigated in this paper testifies), while deprioritizing more traditional welfare assistance. The goal of 'catching up with Europe' has been used to justify two waves of austerity, producing high unemployment levels as well as socio-economic precariousness and the suffering that accompanies both. While state resources are invested in providing psychological support and entrepreneurship training to the unemployed in the form of the 1–4 day seminars discussed in this paper, those who are relying on the state for assistance are relegated to spaces of limbo.

At the same time as waiting is produced by the way public welfare is structured and funded, this waiting is also stigmatized. Rather than recognizing social assistance as a matter of social rights, it is framed as a form of dependence on the state. Waiting is

construed by state agents as synonymous with expecting care from the state – a form of political subjectivity perceived as inadequate in post-Soviet Latvia. Yet, rather than being a Soviet remnant, as the policy makers, civil servants, and 'competitiveness-raising' trainers interpreted it, we can see how this waiting is a part of neo-liberal politics of delegitimizing demands for social rights. The ubiquity of physical and virtual waiting of the unemployed in Latvia emerges as an effect of austerity politics that are part of neo-liberal governance despite being framed as their target. The developmental vision of 'catching up' seeks to produce competitive individuals, yet at the same imposes a state of suspended life.[24]

Notes

[1] I am grateful to Manali Desai and the two anonymous reviewers for their critique and suggestions that have improved the paper. I also thank the colleagues at the NYLON seminar group, the SOYUZ symposium at Columbia University (March 2013), and the *Popular Geopolitics* workshop at the University College London (February 2015) for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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[2] Limited research has so far been done on waiting and its political deployments, despite prominent sociological and anthropological studies of time (Auyero 2012: 26). A short piece on employment agencies by German sociologist and journalist Siegfried Kracauer,

written in 1930, points to the temporal organization of this space but explores the spatial dimension in more detail (1997), see also Tonkiss 2000). Barry Schwartz's book *Queuing and Waiting* (1975) takes waiting as its key focus, demonstrating how 'the distribution of waiting time coincides with the distribution of power' (1975: 4–5). Vincent Crapanzano (1985) describes sensitively the subjective states of waiting among white South Africans amidst profound social transformations and perceived loss in symbolic status and privilege. See also Auyero (2012: 26–8) for a succinct overview of existing literature on waiting.

[3] See e.g. Bohle and Greskovits (2007, 2012); Eglitis and Lace (2009); Eglitis (2011); Cerami and Vanhuysse (2009); Stenning et al. (2010); Sommers and Woolfson (2014).

[4] I invoke the Foucauldian notion of 'problematisation' here, to refer to the process through which a particular social phenomenon is constituted as a target of thought and/or politics (see e.g. Foucault (1997 [1984]).

[5] Passivity is associated in the popular imagination with an 'out-dated' (read: Soviet) mentality also in other post-socialist societies (Dunn 2004; Buchowski 2006; Kubik 2013).

[6] I borrow here Michael Herzfeld's notion of disruptive figures from his discussion of a different context, namely the Maltese community in Greece who 'literally and materially disrupted the image of a harmonious nation' (2005: 60).

[7] I follow Lynne Haney's understanding of 'welfare regimes' as 'historically specific combinations of state policies and institutional practices that together set the terms of state redistribution and interpretation' (2002: 8).

[8] I thank Barbara Samaluk for bringing this paper to my attention.

[9] In a similar vein, Elizabeth Povinelli observes in her book *Economics of Abandonment* that certain social groups and their 'social projects and worlds' are denied recognition in contemporary liberalism (Povinelli 2011: 76). She speaks of 'pockets of abandonment' and 'virtual queue[s] in the seams of late liberalism' (2011: 29, 77) that groups like the indigenous people are relegated to.

[10] Following Ann Laura Stoler, I understand political ontology as 'that which is about the *ascribed* being or essence of things, the categories of things that are thought to exist or can exist in any specific domain, and the specific attributes assigned to them' (2009: 4).

[11] I attended the 'competitiveness-raising' seminars regularly throughout the fieldwork period, many weeks for four or five days in a row. Over the course of the fieldwork, I sought to take part in a range of different seminars by different trainers, in order to become familiar with the variety of topics and training approaches they employed. In addition to being participant at the seminars, I also spent two or three four-hour sessions every week during October and November 2011 observing the registration process at the Riga office. In the *waiting* room, sitting next to a registration agent, I observed the interactions around the initial document check and the handing out of queue numbers and listened to how people presented their circumstances and claims. In the *registration* room, my focus was on the scripted encounters between employment agents and their 'clients'. In addition to my time at the Riga branch office, I occasionally visited the head office of the Employment Agency where I spoke to staff members and assisted one of the civil servants responsible for the 'Competitiveness-Raising' programme nation-wide with conducting the selection process of seminar trainers. Additionally, I interviewed several

former directors and other top-level civil servants of the Employment Agency, former and current policy makers at the Ministry of Welfare, welfare policy analysts, and a former minister of employment affairs.

[12] Hereafter, I have used pseydonyms to protect my informants' privacy.

[13] Latvian Employment Agency (2012).

[14] No statistics are available regarding the demographic composition of the participants. However, judging by my participant observations, the seminars usually had more female participants than male and though all age groups were represented middle-aged people were most commonly in attendance.

[15] As my interest in this paper is to highlight the temporal politics of the neo-liberal welfare regime, it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the ways in which the unemployed themselves engaged with the seminar rhetoric and what effects this rhetoric of activation had. Yet, I wish to point out that the seminars were indeed experienced as *empowering* by many of my unemployed informants. I discuss their experiences in greater detail in Ozoliņa-Fitzgerald (2015).

[16] The importance of these training programmes comes into relief when considering that the highest proportion of unemployed in Latvia are those with vocational education, obtained mostly during the Soviet period and considered out-dated by employers (Lipskis 2008). English and computer skills are also now commonly required. The recent economic crisis exacerbated this situation even further. Many former accountants and teachers could not find a new job in their professions due to a sudden fall in demand and needed to re-qualify.

[17] Author's interview with a civil servant at the Ministry of Welfare, 06.04.2011.

[18] Latvijas Radio 1, 'Krustpunktā', 28 September 2011.

[19] I thank the anonymous reviewer for *BJS* and the audience at the NYLON conference in Berlin (March 2015) for encouraging me to formulate this point more clearly.

[20] I thank Olga Shevchenko for bringing the publications by Nikolaev to my attention.

[21] Stephen Hanson has explored more broadly the Soviet state's efforts at controlling time (1997). Bradatan (2005) writes on the political production of time in socialism and the kinds of effects that it had on individuals. But see e.g. Caldwell (2004: 111–4) on how the Soviet citizens retained control over their time despite these efforts by the state. Even the mundane activity of lining up was frequently infused with individual initiative and calculation.

[22] Despite the way that the neo-liberal activation is being pitted against the Soviet regime in the Latvian policy rhetoric, it is important to note that the Soviet state prioritized activity – and resulting productivity – as a criterion of worthiness as much as the post-Soviet Latvian state does. Just like there is emphasis on speed and movement today, along with the pressure to reinvent oneself constantly through life-long learning and flexible, transferrable skills, there were Stakhanovite brigades in state socialism, overfilling targets of production and beating the deadlines (see e.g. Lampland (1995); Kharkhordin (1999); see also Yurchak (2006) on the ways in which productivity and activity were administered and valorised in state socialism).

[23] I borrow this phrase from the title of the conference 'Feminism and Intimacy in Cold, Neo-liberal Times' at Goldsmiths, University of London, 21 June 2013.

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