

NYT: May 31, 2013

Want to Save Civilization? Get in Line

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The next time you're stuck behind 250 shoppers in a checkout line that snakes around the aisles in a Trader Joe's, take a moment to ponder exactly what's going on. Yes, you're standing in a queue. Yes, it can be the pits. Except that, all things considered, it's also pretty great.

Think about how lines work. You're in a defined space with other people who are all looking to achieve the same result: purchase groceries; buy tickets; enjoy a movie. Like you, these people have appointments to make and deadlines to meet. Many of them are most likely stronger or faster or smarter than you. Some could easily beat you to your goal if you had to, say, arm-wrestle or engage in a trivia contest to determine who goes first.

Instead, here's what happens: You see people standing in formation while facing in the same direction; you locate the last person in the group; then you go and stand behind that person. That's your spot. Ultimately, and naturally, the line moves forward. At some point, it reduces to zero.

This process may not be fun, but it's fair. Curse lines all you like, but we would be doomed without them. Unless you're simultaneously the strongest, smartest, fastest and most universally capable human being on the planet, you should be thankful that lines exist and that, for the most part, people use them in ways that make life less miserable, not more. Which is to say the line is not a persistent social nuisance. It's one of our most noble collective achievements.

Sadly, all is not well in the world of lines. In fact, things seem to be going sideways when it comes to this form of social ordering.

Exhibit A: At SeaWorld San Antonio, visitors can pay \$15 more than the general-admission price to skip long lines at each park attraction one time or, for \$25 extra, can jump to the front of lines as many times as they want, all day long. With the Flash Pass at Six Flags, park visitors have access to three levels of line-avoidance: patrons purchasing the base-level Flash Pass still have to wait as long as everyone else, but they don't have to actually stand in the lines; the gold-level pass allows visitors to skip ahead of the regular line; and the platinum-level pass allows visitors to skip the line and ride twice in a row. At Universal Studios Hollywood, those willing to pay an extra \$79, in addition to the \$80 general-admission price, for the aptly named Front of Line Pass, will receive priority access to all rides and reserved seating at the park's shows.

Modern line-jumping options aren't merely a theme-park phenomenon. Elite-club memberships have long provided a way for well-heeled travelers to skip airline queues. And paying directly to cut lines has become a popular option at ski resorts and other leisure destinations. At Park City Mountain Resort in Utah, a \$25 Fast Tracks lift-ticket upgrade — described as “an exclusive ticket that gets you into the express lanes at our most popular lifts” — allows you to pay more to wait less. For an extra \$30 each day, visitors to Copper Mountain in Colorado can purchase the Secret! Pass, which includes access to dedicated lift lines reserved for pass holders. At Sunrise Park Resort near Greer, Ariz., guests receive “2 V.I.P. lift tickets with line-cutting privileges” by booking a night at the Sunrise Park Lodge master suite for \$295.

These offerings might sound appealing to you, especially if you are the kind of person with \$295 to spare. But we're not simply talking about convenience here; we're talking about the undermining of one of civilization's greatest social constructs.

And these skip-the-line passes aren't equivalent to, say, H.O.V. lanes or express-checkout lines at the supermarket — arrangements used as incentives for behavior with redeeming societal benefits. These passes are, very simply, profit-maximizing mechanisms that allow people with more money to avoid annoyances that less-wealthy individuals must stomach. They result in the opposite of what lines usually provide us: the certainty that people are ordered based on arrival time rather than disposable income. Even worse than returning us to some pre-line state of nature wherein the strong and young can push past the weak and the old, these line-cutting options enable those with more money to jump ahead of *everyone*.

One particularly forthright Universal Studios Hollywood Web-site commenter summed up the experience this way: “You get to feel like a RockStar by going past all the other peeps in line and making your way to the ‘special’ gate just for Front of the Line ticket holders.”

The line, as a concept and as an ordering principle, maintains several redeeming qualities. Well-functioning, orderly lines teach us patience, fairness and the tenets of nondiscrimination. At their essence, effective lines are simple, efficient and provide a model of good sense. (This is not to suggest, of course, that all lines function ideally, as anyone who has stood outside a Best Buy on [Black Friday](#) with 2,000 cold, grumpy New Jerseyans can attest.) And because lines tend to be composed of fully aware, self-regulating human beings who don't take kindly to cheating or attempts to favor one group over others — the wealthy over the poor, for instance, or the tech-savvy over the not-tech-savvy — it has always been difficult to connive your way to the front. Lines, in this way, can function as society's great equalizer.

Lines can also foster solidarity and a sense of community. This phenomenon was perhaps most evident after 9/11, when security lines at airports moved at an excruciatingly slow pace. At the time, the only thing that kept us all from going bonkers, it seemed, was the fact that we were all in it together and, at least partly, putting up with the hassle for our country, as a kind of patriotic duty.

But even in more everyday situations, people in long lines tend to look out for one another and create bonds. They won't let knuckleheads cut in front of mothers preoccupied with fussing children, and they'll usually save your spot if you have to go to the restroom. Perhaps the best

evidence of the social value of lines is how they operate as self-protecting organisms. The line takes care of its own.

A few years ago, the actor Jason Bateman was reportedly booed when he appeared to be pulled from a line at an Apple store to receive an iPhone early. He apologized and claimed the store's staff was protecting him from paparazzi. (In 2012, Samsung released a series of ads that parodied Apple's infamous lines, casting the people waiting as complacent sheep.) More recently, in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, a man — who apparently thought himself more pump-worthy than others waiting in line to fill up at a BP station during the gas-rationing period following [Hurricane Sandy](#) — posed as a federal agent in order to cut to the front. He was arrested. Chalk up another one for the line.

While we may not like to admit it, most of us can understand where Bateman and the Sheepshead Bay impostor were coming from — at least with respect to hating the act of waiting in a line. In many ways, we've been conditioned to adopt that posture. Images of American citizens waiting in line for food and jobs during the 1930s are used to illustrate the failure of society and government in the United States. The problem of excessively long lines at polling places during recent U.S. presidential elections has been described in the media as a symbol of a "broken" voting system. Meanwhile, for several decades during the 20th century, Americans cited the existence of long bread lines in Russia to support claims of superiority and discount the viability of communism as a social order capable of ensuring the well-being of a citizenry. In her 2010 novel "The Line," the Moscow-born author Olga Grushin uses a long — and long-lasting — line as a jumping-off point for an allegory that nods to various elements of Russian society and political leadership.

But hating the act of waiting in line and hating the mere existence of lines are two different things. The former, of course, is completely reasonable — waiting in lines is boring and tedious and holds us back from doing that which we are waiting around to do. No one likes that.

Deep down, though, amid the hatred, we fully understand that waiting in lines is the right thing to do. No one likes the process, but, for the most part, we're all equal. Everyone has to wait in lines at some point, whether you're waiting seven hours for Shakespeare in the Park tickets, trying to survive the soul-sucking experience that is a trip to the Department of Motor Vehicles or just trying to get on the bus. And this is why we instinctively find it odious when, for instance, we hear rumors (incorrect as it turns out) that a Hollywood hotshot gained admission to a once-in-a-lifetime [same-sex marriage](#) argument at the Supreme Court by paying someone to wait in line for him. Or when we learn (as we did recently) that a company offering tours to Disney World will reportedly include, for a price, a disabled tour guide — thus letting you and your family follow the guide to the much-shorter, handicapped-only lines. It's also why you're very likely to get socked in the eye if you try to jump the line at Shake Shack. We will fight for the sanctity of that which we curse. ("If we all have to wait in this stupid line, so do you, buddy.")

When it comes to lines, in order to earn our respect, you've got to put yourself through the actual waiting that we all hate. That's part of the deal. But there's another equally important universal truth of the line that goes something like this: No cuts! And that brings us back to those horrendous pay-to-cut-the-line arrangements that have become popular.

At its core, the act of cutting the line is a power play — the stuff of bullies and braggarts. So more than simply enabling some people to ski and ride more than most, these ticket plans also serve to place those with more money on the level of the straight-up jerks of the world in the eyes of those stuck waiting in line. Whereas in the past everyone at Six Flags cursed the long line that preceded a ride on Bizarro, now only some people do — and, more important, those people now also curse the Flash Pass riders, too. That's an unnecessary rift manufactured from scratch by a theme park. And it's the sort of thing that will become more common if fee-based, line-evading opportunities continue to crop up throughout society.

Instead of bending the well-established rules of the line to benefit the interests of the wealthiest among us, let's relax and wait in lines as we always have — waiting our turn, standing in order, like reasonable adults, the kind who care about other people. Modern attempts at circumventing the line reflect something sad about society. In more ways than ever, people seem to be trying to jump the line and worm their way to the front, fairness — and fellow citizens — be damned. Single file or otherwise, we should not stand for that sort of thing.