Malaysian Queue Culture: An Ethnography of Urban Public Behaviour

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Introduction

In recent years there has been a shift in emphasis from laboratory studies of collective behaviour (Grosser et al. 1951, Mintz 1951, Kelley et al. 1965) to observations of crowds in natural settings. These recent studies have focused on the spatial-temporal aspects of crowd behaviour (Fisher 1972, Stark 1974), crowd locomotion (McPhail and Miller 1973), and crowd forms (Milgram and Toch 1969, Wright 1978). This emphasis on the physical characteristics of crowds and their relationship to non-verbal communication has filled a lacuna in the study of collective behaviour, but has unfortunately minimized the importance of the socio-cultural setting in which crowds are observed. Indeed, Wright (1978, pp. 126, 152) has boldly asserted that crowd forms are universal and culture-free, thus advocating an approach that legitimizes crowd stereotypes.

No doubt physical space and movements influence interactions within collectivities, but they are not the only factors that shape crowd behaviour. Cultural expectations also mediate between physical settings and crowd behaviour. A rally in England and a rally in Turkey may appear similar at initial glance, since we can attribute their resulting forms to more or less similar physical and other environmental constraints. But this comparison tells us little about behavioural outcomes because the expectations an Englishman has of a rally probably differ from those of a Turk. The pursuit of universally recognizable crowd forms may enhance the need for cross-cultural comparisons, but ironically it fails to highlight perceptual differences that are crucial for understanding behavioural outcomes.

My aim in this paper is to demonstrate that an understanding of crowd behaviour entails an analysis of the wider structural conditions in a particular society and the cultural expectations of its members. I emphasize that crowds are not independent social entities; rather they reflect how public order is organized within a specific socio-cultural context. I will focus on queuing as a form of crowd behaviour to examine how public order is produced and maintained.

Queuing is such a common sight around the world that most of us would assume its occurrence to be an established, routine aspect of the public order. Yet, this form of public behaviour reveals much about people's expectations of fair exchange, distribution of responsibility, and the utilization of social space and time.
These normative expectations become especially evident when queue behaviour is cross-culturally analysed. Most world travellers would probably notice that queuing in Western societies is relatively more orderly than queuing in Asian societies. For a sociologist, this superficial observation can be transformed into a specific question concerning cultural differences in the perception of public order. He would be specially interested in identifying the norms which link general cultural patterns to the situational phenomenon of queuing. In other words, queuing can be treated as a sociological tool for analysing different levels of covert understanding about the public order.

The ideal concept of a queue is that it is an orderly form of crowd where people wait in line to be served. Studies of Western queues (Mann 1969, 1970; Schwartz 1975) have shown that the behavioural intricacies of the waiting line are related to what Homans (1961) has called the rule of distributive justice. In other words, the principle of “first come, first served” in queuing depends on the belief that a person's rewards should be commensurate with or proportional to his investments or labours. If a person has spent many hours waiting in line, then according to this rule he should be served first rather than a person who joined the queue later. This is because he assigns responsibility to his own actions and expects other people to do likewise. Only he and no one else should receive due rewards for the amount of energy that he has expended. Orderly queuing may be seen as a logical consequence of the expectation that allocates earned entitlements to individual responsibility. The strict enforcement of orderly queuing by the police and other persons in authority in some societies signifies the official sanctions that legitimize this expectation.

The observation that disorderly queues are frequent occurrences in many Asian societies poses serious questions about the universal applicability of the rule of distributive justice. If this rule exists in Asian societies, is it consistently maintained in public places and if not, why not? Or are there other standards of “fair play” that need to be explored? These are questions that can only be answered by an empirical investigation of Asian queues. In this paper I will attempt to provide some answers to the above questions by analysing four cases of urban queue behaviour in Malaysia. But first, a description of the Malaysian urban scene is in order.

The Malaysian Public

A person who is familiar with urban Malaysia may not find unruly and disorderly crowds to be an unusual feature of Malaysian life — commuters elbowing and squeezing their way into packed buses, people cutting into queues that snake around buildings, four-lane highways filled with five or more columns of cars during rush-hours, and so on. Although his sense of indignation may not be aroused by these scenes, there are many Malaysians who write in regularly to the local newspapers, describing the sufferings they have had to endure at bus-stops, cinema box-offices, and other public places. While locals and visitors may bemoan the lack of civility and courtesy in the Malaysian public, the interesting question is why do members of the Malaysian public behave the way they do? This question can be examined from two angles — the social conditions peculiar to Malaysia that give rise to these crowd scenes and Malaysians’ attitudes toward public space.