




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Having a moment: the revolutionary semiotic of COVID-19

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Abstract

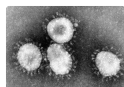
The time of COVID-19 represents a distinct, but currently under-defined and under-theorised, temporal moment. Using semiotic methods, this paper examines how the mechanical actions of the virus, through becoming social, create a new viral time, heralding an already-arrived new historical epoch. This epoch, which is simultaneously both homogenous and undifferentiated at one tempo, and supercharged with change, events and radically uncertain futurity at another, is riven with revolutionary potential. The existential challenge posed to the faltering socio-economic order is evidenced by a panicked political response combining reactionary attempts to reimpose temporal certainty and fixity, with desperate material concessions to a public suddenly expelled from a previously subsuming dominant productive time of capitalism. As such, this temporal crisis offers the necessary, if not sufficient, moment for profound re-imaginings of our productive and social relations, and an opportunity to look beyond the possible end of the world, and towards the end of capitalism.

Keywords

revolutionary moment, viral time, Boris Johnson, power, historical epoch, capitalist realism, semiotics





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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

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Introduction

‘What, generally speaking, are the symptoms of the revolutionary situation?’ (Lenin, 1964: 213)

‘Doesn’t a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well?’ (Benjamin, 2003: 390)

The world is having a moment. The question is: what *kind* of moment is it? What are its temporal contours? How does it function, from within and without? And most pertinently, what unique threats does it bring, and what possibilities?

These are, as Marx said, ‘days into which 20 years are compressed’ (Marx & Engels, 2010: 468). For people living in the UK during the week from 16 to 23 March 2020, the mechanics of the economy, of the routines of everyday life, of school, of work, of leisure, of the exercising of personal liberty and, fundamentally, of the relationship between the citizen and the state changed more substantially than at any time since the end of the Second World War¹. And they changed with the furious, implacable tempo of an avalanche. Yet the brief period of rapid change was simultaneously an open-ended duration of stasis, ‘a period of contextually appropriate suspension’ as a comment piece in the *Lancet Infectious Diseases* described it (Poland, 2020: 1). To use, and to temporarily confound, the distinction Benjamin makes between the ‘social democratic’ model of historical progress and revolutionary time, the current moment is both one of ‘homogenous empty time’ and of super-charged *Jetztzeit* (now-time) (Benjamin, 2003: 394-395)². The following semiotic analysis will push at this contradiction, with an eye to potential symptoms of a revolutionary situation.

Viral time: the first casualty of war is metaphor

We’ve become so blasé about virality, and so boringly overfamiliar with it as metaphor, that we’ve somehow forgotten the meaning beneath the metaphor: blazing speed; invisible, ex temporised networks; resilience; ubiquity; hegemony. To go viral has come to mean to confound the expected relationships between distance and time, to distort them beyond what was previously considered possible, so that linear chains appear as simultaneity³.

Aside from the almost inconsequential benefit that the well-worn corporate metaphors of virality will fall out of the public discourse, this viral time has disrupted our relations

with and within time. At the heart of this disruption lies an epidemiological fact, or rather the space where a fact should be: the virus brings its own temporalities. There are certain, albeit variable, timeframes for stages of COVID-19: the time between infection and manifestation of symptoms; the time from first symptom to peak of illness, and through to the end of the illness; the periods of contagion, including the window in which human-to-human transmission can occur, and those sub-periods during which ‘viable’ virions can survive on various surfaces. Regardless of what these times might be, or how they may be stabilised by epidemiology, their current radical instability constitutes COVID-19’s first temporal infection; we live in a viral time, the tempo and duration of which are unknown.

The present analysis is not concerned with the primary question of describing that temporality, but with two secondary concerns, in the first place: the temporality of describing that temporality, and the rapid infection of temporal instability. The former is a reflection of the latter. Radical temporal instability demands swift accounts. Of course, this neurotic compulsion to lay out a temporal road on a landscape of such uncertainty and unpredictability reminds us of nothing more than the cartoon character overrunning a cliff edge, legs spinning, suspended in the air, unaware – for some uncertain moment – that the trajectory they were imagining hopefully along the horizontal axis is about to be dramatically overwritten by a narrative imposed forcefully along the vertical. Such a moment within our moment is acutely exemplified by UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s *concentrated squinting to camera* (statesmanlike concern), behind a Downing Street desk (metonym of authority), accompanied by the union flag (patriotic duty, national unity), talking about the ‘latest steps’ his government is taking, on 23 March (Figure 1). A few days later, he was self-isolating with symptoms. Within a fortnight he was in ICU.

That the attempts to describe and proscribe the viral temporality, that the impositions of temporal control and order are themselves the most obvious semiotic excess *qua* evidence of their failure and impotence, should be apparent from the arrival on UK doormats of a letter from the Prime Minister at the precise moment he was known to be struggling with the illness in hospital. Despite avoiding dating the letter, and despite the opening acknowledgement that ‘[i]n just a few short weeks, everyday life in this country has changed dramatically’ (Johnson, 2020), the Prime Minister could not avoid making himself hostage to fortune, for any projection into an imagined future based on continuity with a present whose identity is anchored in the pre-COVID-19 era invites the laughter of a scornful Old Testament God: *Mann traoch, Gott Läuch*, as the Yiddish proverb goes⁴. Viral time then operates as a deep temporal instability that dialectically both provokes and is built upon repeated, defeated attempts to reinstate temporal order. That this relationship echoes that of the biochemical

¹ Both Stephanie Davies and Jocelyn Catty write of these temporal disruptions to the routines of healthcare professionals in their contributions to the *Waiting in Pandemic Times*: Catty, 2020; Davies, 2020.

² We are not unfamiliar with these simultaneously existing contradictory times. Hasn’t the Groundhog Day crisis of Brexit been a temporal battle ground between the inertia of a zombie political consensus and the hot flushes of a geriatric reactionary change? As a political economy, we’ve been rehearsing this temporal duality for four years.

³ The confusion over the boundaries of figurative and literal meanings of virality are nicely illustrated by a *New England Journal of Medicine* online conference taking the title ‘Epidemics Going Viral: Innovation vs Nature’ (Fineberg *et al.*, 2018).

⁴ ‘Man makes a plan and God laughs.’



Figure 1. Wile E Coyote between running off the cliff and before the anvil lands on his head. UK PM Boris Johnson announces lockdown measures, 23 March 2020 (BBC, 2020b). This is reproduced under the [Open Government Licence v3.0](#).

relationship between the virus and the infected host's cells and immune response is no coincidence, where the virus imposes its temporality on epithelial cells used to longer, and predictable lifetimes. Viral time is not a metaphoric association between the viral action within our cells and the impact of a pandemic on our lives; it is the literal infection, proliferation and enforcement of the temporality of the virus on our social conventions of time. Given that this is mostly conducted not by virions or viral RNA but by our political, economic, medical and legal reactions to the virus, we can say that viral time is the *becoming social* of COVID-19.

Similarly, just as it is not metaphorical, neither is this conceptualisation of viral time a nod to the transhumanism or inhumanism of Keith Ansell Pearson's viroid life (Pearson, 1997). Pearson's neo-Nietzschean thrill at recognising the anthropocentric arrogance in our imagining humanity at the temporal centre of existence, as unrivalled subject, finds some analogue in the right wing and environmentalist commentaries of COVID-19 as 'overdue', 'corrective' or 'natural.' Such positions are underlaid by a simple, often-recurring misanthropic fantasy of weeding the garden of humanity; inevitably, the fantasist's murderous fetishes about people are really only about *other* people. Naturally, we could use this pandemic as an opportunity 'to think *transhumanly* the future' (Pearson, 1997: 7), but, modestly, we'll retain our preoccupation with humanity. Our argument is that viral temporalities only truly *become* as a literal consequence of the virus *becoming*, and only then when doing so in the cells of living humans and again, even then, only in clinically relevant (and palpable) ways. It should be otiose to observe that the same RNA being rampant in bats brought no viral temporalities, as there was no *becoming social*. In *becoming social*, COVID-19 imposes viral time, but this viral time is still dynamically and dialectically constituted in the social, and as such is composed not only of the – currently mysterious or at least uncalculated – temporal quanta of the virus but of the pre-existing social and productive relations. A longer piece of research than this current analysis ought to explore rigorously and critically the 'the incorporation of material-social factors (including gender, race, sexuality, religion, and nationality, as well as class) but also technoscientific and

natural factors in the processes of materialization [of viral time]' (Barad, 2007: 224). Even describing viral time as radical temporal instability speaks to a certain blinkered position of privilege, for some, for the majority, radical instability is the very condition of life, materially, spatially and temporally.

It is precisely this position of privilege occupied by history. History is, perhaps, time seen from the vantage point of power. So it is possible that people, even the majority of people, within a moment can experience temporal instability without that moment being, inherently and historically, an age of temporal instability. In such cases, a temporal hegemony remains unchallenged by the conditions of the moment, and so the moment is not historic but rather is within the smooth flowing grand narrative of history, as understood from within that untroubled moment. Our current viral time offers a sudden challenge to this⁵. The temporal *becoming social* of COVID-19 constitutes an historic moment, as the defining characteristic of an historical epoch. This does not mean an epoch wholly accounted for by the *becoming social* of COVID-19. It is beyond folly to attempt to define an epoch from within. The COVID-19 epoch will outlast the period of viral time upon which it is entirely reliant as a *sui generis* epistemic origin, much as the blaze outlives the spark.

Incubation: the invisible arrival of an epoch

The origin of the moment lies outside it and prior to it, although is only discoverable from within. There was no arrival but only an absolute awareness of being in the midst, temporally and spatially (and indeed the distinction has vanished here) of the present moment, the moment as it presents presence. The COVID-19 epoch had already begun before we saw it; the lingering (20)19 in its moniker a constant reminder that it had the temporal jump on us (see also: Catty, 2020, *Waiting in Pandemic Times*). We did not know we were living in the COVID-19 age, just as, for an innocent almost-eternity that is now forever gone, we didn't know we lived in the pre-COVID-19 age. Where before, we lived just in time, now we live (and have lived) in history.

When journalists reach for cultural texts that 'predicted COVID-19', this meaning is only fleetingly possible, and a last vanity of an already passed age. An example from the right-wing Daily Telegraph is typical, summarising the plot of Steven Soderberg drama *Contagion* (2011) as 'eerily prescient ... where marauding looters roam the streets fighting over food and supplies' (Prince, 2020). Caveating this with '[w]e haven't yet reached the dystopian breakdown of social order the movie predicted', Prince reconfigures the film from being perhaps speculative or merely fantastical to predictive. This moment of prediction is lost though as the past, as distinctly, consciously pre-COVID-19 is now a product of a present itself not yet fixed by the future. *Contagion* and similar films, books, and

⁵ Although Martin Moore, writing in *Waiting in Pandemic Times*, offers a persuasive and nuanced account of how the present COVID-19 pandemic is both in tension and in step with 'values and practices with long antecedents' (Moore, 2020).

the esoteric and cynical rantings of hucksters and charlatans will not be understood as predictive *of* but projections *by* a COVID-19 epoch that was struggling to manifest itself in not-yet-conscious humanity. In some ways, this is the inverse of the resurrection Jalal Toufic argues that a community performs on its immaterially lost cultural traditions after a surpassing disaster (Toufic, 2009: 14). Rather than having to re-instate projective texts like *Contagion*, it is as if they were zombies before, and now re-arrive as a future tradition. As one user commented beneath the [YouTube trailer for *Contagion*](#) (enjoying rocketing views since early March): ‘They should change the intro: Based on future true events.’ Or, as another put it:

There are movies based on true story

Then comes this movie

Now

True story based on movie story 😐😐

What could be more intoxicating and potentially revolutionary than an epoch that has already arrived by subterfuge and demonstrates effortlessly that our speculative fancies can become truth? Here is a reversal of Baudrillard’s account of the Gulf War that never happened: the fantasy apocalypses that became truth (Baudrillard, 1995). And it is not the becoming truth, but the epochal temporal sleight of hand by which they now will always have been true – or at least, a truth to come – that is the most shocking. In the pre-COVID-19 age, as under any *ancien régime*, we did not know we were naïve. We thought we were the present, but we were the past. We thought we were real, and in history, but we were just living a fiction that was waiting for the moment when it could become real. One is reminded of the joke: ‘How did people in the medieval period already know to call it medieval?’ But that joke provides a moment of terrible horror: a blank future that could be freedom or could be extermination (or both). As such, we conjure up protectors from our fantasy world. The remarkable spectacle of [Kate Winslet and other actors from *Contagion* giving epidemiological advice](#) or a [UK *Guardian* sizzle reel for COVID-19](#) borrowing the filmic rhetoric of disaster flicks clearly shows how all bets are off when it comes to deciding the boundary between reality and its representation (BBC, 2020a; Topham & Lamborn, 2020).

These are the ‘the breath of the air that pervaded earlier days’ that Benjamin describes. Of course, at, or just past, the birth of a new epoch, and faced with the open blankness of a future that entails, people seek solace in reactionary gymnastics of the intellect and belief, to live only off those last breaths of air from the *before* times. Conspiracies that this was all just part of the plan or that we are moving through temporal terrain that has been mapped by seers and prophets, or more mundanely, by filmmakers and epidemiologists, all form part of the same strategy to make the new epoch move (or be stilled) according to the tempos of the lost status quo. The idea that [dead pseudo-psychics like Sylvia Browne](#) (Kettley, 2020), or [paranoiacs-for-cash like David Icke](#) (Edwards, 2020), are running the show is less alarming than the emancipatory

explosion of viral time insisting that we make a new future for ourselves.

Day 18.5: illusory regimens of time

‘This is the moment,’ [PM Johnson anaphorically mouths over and over in his post-illness press conference on 27 April 2020](#). ‘This is the moment’, again and again; whilst announcing it is absolutely *not* the moment (of recovery, of an end to lockdown, of change or ‘victory’); whilst saying literally that he ‘cannot say.’ Timelessness makes a puppet show of power. Desperate to fill the timeless moment, times are created. In epidemiology: the time-course of viral reproduction; transmission times; quarantine times; epidemic time. In politics: the time of responses; the periods for fiscal support; timescales of legislation (their arrival, their duration and the time constraints they enact). In the media: timelines of the story; narratives and testimonials of those with and very evidently without the disease. In the home: new timetables to carve up the undifferentiated mass that has suddenly arrived or been made palpable. People running marathons in their own homes – the miles curled up and back on themselves in [tiny Chinese apartments](#) (Euronews, 2020) or [French balconies](#) (Moran, 2020) with the impossible hidden length of intestines – was just as much a measure, and a management through measuring, of time, as it was of (imagined) space. Pandemic is the condition of simultaneity confounding distance, as [glossed by the BBC](#):

The outbreak was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 11 March. This is when an infectious disease is passing easily from person to person in many parts of the world at the same time. ([The Visual and Data Journalism Team, 2020](#))

This simultaneity creates implausible implications of causality such as [the *Guardian* live feed headline suggesting that a lockdown in France was impacting on the election of a US presidential candidate by the Democratic Party](#): ‘LIVE/ Ohio primary polls halted as French told to stay inside’ [The *Guardian* Coronavirus Live](#) (2020).

Time as known is gone. The minute, as the gold standard marker of time in the old epoch, has vanished. It was once an authoritarian guard, keeping a watchful eye on how well, how *productively*, we managed our day: minutes to the tube stop; the minutes an integral part of the identity of every National Rail train, ‘the seven past’ means nothing now; the minutes of a break; ‘just a minute’ responses to urgent work demands. No one uses them now, any more than they use inkwells or floppy disks. Time is moving differently and hourly or half hourly chunks are sufficient for all purposes. There are no fag breaks, or 15-minute theatre intervals, or injury time added on. When we work through the internet – that vast machinic network that obliterates time and space – when we Zoom our colleagues and Skype our friends, the small change of minutes isn’t needed to buy us anything. We can pay cash, in big denomination notes, and like the cowboy businessman Tom Cassidy in *Psycho*, we never carry more than we can afford to lose (Hitchcock, 1960). We have no need miserly to keep time with minutes.

Newly, time is kept through a daily logging of death and case figures. These figures are neither for epidemiologists – who are outspokenly clear on their limited relationship with the reality of the disease – or policy makers. Rather, they function to create a sense of shape, and specifically, of progress in the great expanse of empty time created by the crisis. Albeit, currently at time of writing, the progress of the line of the enemy army. More than any other rhetorical device, over-stretched analogies with the Second World War, already in the ascendant in UK political discourse since 2008, are the *lingua franca* of COVID-19. This time around, we are simultaneously the besieged of the Blitz in the bomb shelters and the lightning strike Luftwaffe of the *Blitzkrieg*. Time itself is weaponised against the timelines being dreamt up to mark time. In a timeless moment without a future, time is only the marking of time. It is now an epidemiological truism that rapidity of response ‘buys time’ (Wu & McGoogan, 2020: 1241) and that this temporal manoeuvre finds expression graphically in the (hoped for) flattened curve. Data, tips, tactics and strategies for this can be searched for in a present widened through datafication (García-Basteiro *et al.*, 2020) or in a past calcified into wisdom (Hick & Biddinger, 2020). For temporal urgency, it would be hard to beat the *NEJM* editorial of 1 April 2020 that adopts a war metaphor and an intense time window of ‘ten weeks’ where ‘[t]he aim is not to

flatten the curve; the goal is to crush the curve’ (Fineberg, 2020: 1). This war is powered by an immediate, global surveillance – lovingly called down by the people – that would embarrass the most assiduous police state. The emergence of ‘nowcasting’ real-time surveillance (Preis & Moat, 2014) whereby ‘history is written daily’ (Engelmann, 2020) makes the regimens of time a thickening of the present, as if the diachronic imaginary is so horrifying it has to be forced into a synchronic network.

A regimen of time is the recommended therapy for a loss of time. Again, this is not a metaphorical use of language. The viral time enacting on us through *becoming social* demands the temporal therapeutics common to all of medical authority’s reactions to pathologies. Medical and state authority are woven together through these regimental commands – the virus will be made to conform to the regime’s timeframe as this time chart from the UK Government’s advice booklet shows (Figure 2). Law and medicine are conflated, just as the unpunctuated imperatives of the booklet’s title – Coronavirus Stay at Home Protect the NHS Save Lives – collapse all times into an expansive perpetual present (UK Government, 2020a). If the future cannot guarantee the present, then the present must dictate the future, by writing it into a timeline, building it out of daily deaths and new cases and unemployment figures, like a



Figure 2. Isolation timelines taken from the UK Government guidance booklet ‘Coronavirus Stay At Home Protect the NHS Save Lives’ (2020). This is reproduced under the Open Government Licence v3.0.

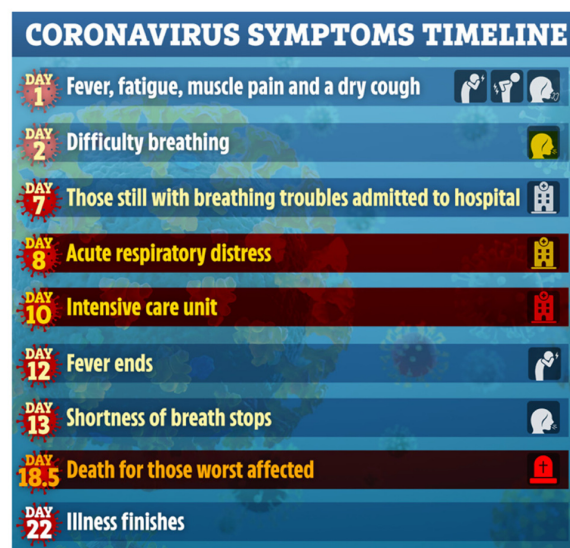
sole survivor climbing out of a mass grave by stacking corpses. These temporal regimes attempt to assert meaning and causality, and – by extension – a sense of reliable, predictable futurity. [The Financial Times conflates ‘how’ with ‘when’, and time with space, in its dynamic map of the COVID-19 spread \(Visual & Data Journalism Team, 2020\)](#). Similarly, its header graphic, in rejecting disruptive viral time, forces an eerie timelessness, through its overlaid spatial simultaneity. The emptiness of the strangely, unconventionally centered Pacific Ocean, is at the same time the emptiness of Times Square (the spatio-temporal ‘crossroads of the world’). If we cannot accept viral time, we are left with regulating the moment out of all time.

Ultimately, these regimes implode into nonsensical brutality, born from a techno-bureaucratic dictatorial assault on the unruly time. *The Sun*’s timeline of symptoms – proudly underpinned by ‘scientists’ – offers an illusion of technocratic control ([Figure 3](#)). But the insertion of what is presumably an average time until death – 18.5 days – appears as a monstrous diktat from an authority that knows it is reduced only to the performance of power. When is the fateful day, ‘Day 18.5’? Is that noon on the 18th day or noon on the 19th day? When did the dreadful countdown start? Only knowing that could we possibly make any sense of this hard marker of curtailed futurity. In reality, in viral time, there is no ‘Day 18.5’ on which ‘death’ appears under the heading of a ‘symptom’. This assertion, this linguistic-semiotic act, is the order-word as power-marker, so playfully described in the fourth plateau of Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* ([Deleuze & Guattari, 2004: 84](#)). In the absence of real historical acts, all power has its own enunciation and reproduction. This is what the UK Government means by its mantra of ‘the right action at the right time.’ This is the temporal regime public health authorities attempt to impose on viral time, slotting

it into convenient weeks, just as every bacterial infection has obeyed the constraints of antibiotic regimens measured always in seven-day intervals. And this is the tactic reaching its apotheosis with [President Trump presenting a timeline of his timely response to COVID-19](#) based on excising the month of February, and using this to then claim ‘total authority’ ([McCarthy, 2020](#)). Temporal disciplining is the last refuge of the ruling class scoundrel in retreat from radical viral time.

Opportunities of the revolutionary moment: will the universe survive?

COVID-19 has undone the subsumption of all social life, and all social time, under capitalism and has disrupted what Negri calls ‘Marx’s tautology of time, life and production’ ([Negri, 2003: 35](#)), and torn apart an established temporal *Umwelt*, that had been so successful in presenting itself as enduring, eternal and inevitable. COVID-19 creates a temporality that ruptures this *Umwelt*. It has lifted huge sections of social life dramatically out of productive time, forcing it out through the imposition of its own *becoming social* viral time. An historical juncture therefore exists, with the suddenness of the COVID-19 age. In Lenin’s terms, we have at least the first of the three symptoms of the revolutionary situation: a crisis ‘when it is impossible for the ruling class to maintain their rule without any change’ ([Lenin, 1964: p.231](#)). Already, almost immediately, we in the UK saw radical, swift reconfigurations of economic, productive and social relations – the crisis in the social (the *becoming social* of COVID-19 as viral time) required this abrupt amputation of productive work and time, and brought in new economic arrangements: a temporary guaranteed income for currently non-productively working furloughed workers; nationalisation of the rail operating companies, who became instantly unviable (if they ever were) as private businesses when their customer demand fell by 95% within a week;



Scientists have produced a day-by-day breakdown of the typical Covid-19 symptoms

Figure 3. Coronavirus symptom timeline. Reproduced from [The Sun website \(Jones, 2020\)](#) with permission from News UK.

exemptions from business taxes; mortgage ‘holidays’ and ‘support’ for renters⁶; loans and grants to businesses unable to trade.

It is not exactly that these responses are unprecedented. Similar interventions have been seen in economies undergoing similar crises of productivity, but these crises have had their origins, as well as their consequences, in the domain of the social-economic-productive nexus. Conversely, the crises of industrialised warfare in the first half of the 20th century, and the context for Lenin’s formulation of the symptoms of the revolutionary situation, drew *more* of human life into productive time, subsuming more of social life under capitalism, through the total war economies produced. What is un(der)precedented is that an *extra-economic* cause – the *becoming social* of COVID-19 as viral time – has led the ruling class voluntarily to force workers out of production, to eject social life and time from its vanquished subsumption under capitalism. And the ruling class did this not from any generous largesse (of spirit or of means), but rather to protect itself from a dual threat: to physical health, by viral infection, and to economic health, by infection of viral temporality. And to protect against viral time and to insist (at least rhetorically) on the return to the (past) business as usual, the legislation is littered, desperately, with the word ‘temporary’, as a swift medicinal remedy to the unavoidable word ‘emergency’ (UK Public General Acts, 2020). Granted, for individuals this unimagined parole from the capitalist temporal subsumption might only take the form of empty, homogenous time, the bored, listless, anxious flat plains of ‘lockdown’. But what then might super-charge this time into a revolutionary *Jetztzeit* is that moment when the ruling class come back to take away what has been given, to demand that the people resubmerge themselves in the capitalist temporal framework, to insist that we all, hands in pockets, whistling, amble back through the open doors of the prison and turn the latchkey on ourselves again.

Of course, we might just do that. Lenin is explicit that the revolutionary situation does not fatalistically determine a revolution. Even if this first symptom coincides with or causes that second symptom – ‘when the suffering and want of the oppressed classes have grown more acute than usual’ (p.214) – it is incumbent upon us to manifest the third symptom, where the masses take on the duty of independent historical action (for more on the importance of struggle see the discussion in Osserman & Lê 2020, *Waiting in Pandemic Times*). Here is where the new epoch works in our favour. We are now in history, and within history we can take historical action. As Benjamin says: ‘The historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present that is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand and has come to standstill.’ (2003: 396) Time has come to a standstill and can now take a stand. Being liberated from a future means also being liberated from the past. Revolutions – even as capitalistic as the American automobile revolution – change from impossible to inevitable in one beat

⁶ This mealy-mouthed measure for renters is barely sketched on the Government’s own website. The financial support that dare not speak its name (UK Government, 2020b).

less than a heartbeat; they have already arrived as the only living time. On the inner cusp of the age of the automobile, the disruptive figure of modernity in *The Magnificent Ambersons* Eugene Morgan (played by Joseph Cotton) remarked whilst swirling at an already-anachronistic belle époque ball: ‘There aren’t any old times. When times are gone, they’re not old, they’re dead! There aren’t any times but new times!’ (Welles, 1942) Truly, the past has never been so dead as now.

But we can find hope in the fact that history, as Marx observes, springs to life, and that human actants can refute Hegelian grey fatalism⁷.

[T]omorrow or the day after, the result will actually spring to life as history lends the whole thing a warmth, vitality, and humour with which the later ‘grey on grey’ contrasts damned unfavourably. (Marx & Engels, 2010: 469)

Of course, speculative and dystopian fictions have repeatedly shown us the revolutionary potential of a terrible pandemic – or equivalent catastrophe – but these have always relied on the eradication of large quantities of people in incredibly short durations⁸. Here, we have relatively small numbers of deaths, in contrast to the tallies of dystopian fiction, and what has been destroyed in large quantities is time itself, specifically the productive time of capitalism, which has been consumed by viral time. As the already-said phrase made famous by Jameson has it, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Jameson, 2003: 76). Senator (and then presidential nominee hopeful) Bernie Sanders mocked the US ruling class’ conflation of the end of capitalism with the end of the universe on the floor of the Senate on 25 March 2020. Indeed, it was not even the end of capitalism, but rather this slight break, this possible early symptom of the coming terminal illness, manifesting in this specific case as an increase in unemployment checks that would exceed the wages of lowest-waged workers currently claiming unemployment. ‘And now I find that some of my Republican colleagues are very distressed, they’re very upset that somebody who’s making 10, 12 bucks an hour might end up with a paycheck for four months more than they received last week. Oh my word, will the universe survive?’ (Shepherd, 2020) It is not that the ruling class just find it easier to imagine the end of the world. It is that they would prefer it to the end of capitalism. This is evident in the political push to ‘re-start’ the economy; better we all die than we all stop making money. Regardless, our historical material reality has forced an imaginary of the end of the world upon us. We no longer need imagine it. Now, we’re faced only with the harder imagining. The one certain thing in our favour is that we have, for the moment, that very uncertain moment in which it can be imagined.

⁷ Many thanks to Laura Salisbury and her forthcoming paper for a rich account of how what she terms Beckett’s *anachromism* – time in shades of grey – characterises the subsumption of all social times, including waiting times, within capital’s labouring time (Salisbury, 2021). It was greatly influential on the writing of this paper.

⁸ In terms of speculative fiction, my hopeful imaginary of the future has been moulded by the writings of Ursula K LeGuin.

Data availability

All data underlying the results are available as part of the article and no additional source data are required.

Author information

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Hannah Proctor

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- This is an interesting reflection on the temporality of the virus in different contexts and registers - from the virus's impact on the body to political discourses to interruptions in working routines etc. It was a useful delineation of how the virus inflects and infects experiences of time, on the ways undoing of social/temporal norms is combined with an attempt to reinstate them.
- The radical temporal instability of the pandemic that this paper discusses itself demands swift accounts and this reads like an account that was written swiftly. I wonder if the author could reflect on the piece's composition as it seems to be a characteristic of the emerging genre of pieces that respond to the pandemic and might help distinguish this from other such pieces if it is a little more self-reflective. What does it mean to theorise a moment as it is happening? What is the temporality demanded of this kind of theorisation of the unfolding present? Interestingly, for all that this paper is about time slowing down the most striking thing reading it is how much more seems to have happened even in the short amount of time since it was written.
- Given the parade of thinkers/philosophers cited here, I also wondered if the author had engaged critically with the proliferation of COVID pieces by philosophers and theorists (Agamben, Zizek, Badiou etc). How does the author's theorisation of the time of the virus differ from others and why is there a compulsion to theorise the virus so quickly?
- I was wondering if the notion of 'viral time' could be clarified. How have the times of other viruses been defined or experienced? Are they all the same? Is the temporality of the pandemic not also wildly dependent on whose experiencing it? I was unclear if the author's definition of 'viral time' applied to all viruses or to this virus in particular. If the latter then it calls into question some of the broader claims being made. If the former then it seems it would need to be justified - few other viruses have had these social ramifications. I assume the answer to this question is related to the argument about COVID 'becoming social' (unlike other viruses?) but it could be clarified. Do other viruses not 'become social' or is it

just a question of degree/magnitude?

- The use of Lenin and Benjamin as key theorists seemed somewhat arbitrary. Why these thinkers and not others? Why are these theories of the twentieth century apposite now? Why invoke Lenin's definition of revolution without discussing any of the global uprisings that have been taking place during the pandemic? Is anything about the Spanish flu relevant to bring in to the discussion of Lenin?
- Is history really 'time seen from the vantage point of power'? This has also been a time in which histories have been contested and different versions of history presented (from Colston's statue being thrown in the river in Bristol to invocations of 'Blitz spirit'). Aren't different kinds of understandings of history simultaneously evident? If (as the author says soon after) we all 'live in history' does that mean that everyone now sees their own lives from the vantage point of power? The notion of history this paragraph implies does not suggest this is the argument being made, in which case perhaps the previous statement should be modified? Later, the author says that we are now in history and can act in history - where were people before? Also if the past seems so dead now (as the author claims) why rely so heavily on all these theories about the early twentieth century? Is this a Benjaminian account of time? If so then surely it needs to be acknowledged that Benjamin and Lenin had very different understandings of time and history and that Benjamin explicitly criticized the kind of progressive understanding of history a theorist like Lenin propounded?
- Relatedly I wondered: is this really the 'birth of a new epoch'? Could it also be seen as magnifying and exacerbating existing structural problems rather than creating new ones? As Benjamin says 'The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule.' The entirety of the eighth thesis 'On the Concept of History' is worth considering seriously in this essay. Is it possible to distinguish between perceptions of a new epoch emerging and some of the material continuities? Does it also depend on a person's perspective?
- I wonder who the 'we' is that the author invokes in the section 'Day 18.5'? It doesn't seem to be a 'we' that includes people who continued working outside their homes throughout the pandemic or of those working while taking on additional care responsibilities or of those who have been ill with the virus and the kinds of experiences of time that attend that. Again, later, is it true that most people have experienced the time as being characterised by boredom and listlessness? This might be the case for some but surely it is not universal. Surely even if time was experienced differently during the pandemic - work changed or stopped while recession loomed - it was still a form of capitalist time? Even if the aftermath of the pandemic sees a decrease in productivity and mass unemployment that is hardly a cessation of capitalism, on the contrary. The conclusion hints at this but it seems like it is not really foregrounded elsewhere in the piece.
- I also wonder if the final paragraph is a little callous about the scale of deaths from the pandemic. That fewer people died than in some fictional dystopia seems like a strange framing.

NB. The questions below seem to apply to scientific papers and did not all apply to this essay but I have attempted to answer them as best I could.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: History

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

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Jeremy Gilbert

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This is an interesting, well-researched and well-written contribution to speculative commentary and analysis of the socio-cultural experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular it reflects usefully upon the specific temporality of viral contagion and the difficulties posed for ordinary modes of governance by this specific temporality. It could engage rather more thoroughly with the historic and recent literature that connects ideas of sociality with ideas of contagion and (actually or metaphorical) viral phenomena (from Tarde to writers like Tony Sampson, and including conventional histories of pandemic. But the range of reference is already quite impressive, and it would arguably take a full book to tease out all of these connections and

implications fully, so I don't think any revisions are strictly necessary.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Yes

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Political and cultural theory, contemporary history and social change.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.
