

# EDITORIAL

## Unequal times

Cathy Elliott and Emily Robinson

---

**W**e have been talking for a long time about the politics of place. The seeming irreconcilability of deracinated citizens of nowhere, on the one hand, and the disempowered yet resurgent people of somewhere, on the other, has been the central preoccupation of post-2016 politics.

Yet perhaps this distinction between ‘somewheres’ and ‘nowheres’ has been overdone. As David Klemperer argues in this issue, David Lammy MP’s recent book, *Tribes*, demonstrates a more nuanced view of place and belonging that offers promise to a politics of the left. We must find ways, as he puts it, ‘to speak the language of community and belonging that cedes no ground to opponents of social progress and minority rights’. As this mention of *progress* suggests, at the root of these debates over the politics of place lies another about the politics of time. The latter has been rather more neglected. Until now.

Time is suddenly unavoidable. These are ‘exceptional times’, as we constantly remind ourselves. It sometimes feels as if we have been at once thrust into History writ large and wrested out of the predictability of the clock time that is often seen to mark the onset, not only of modernity, but of properly historical time. As Andrew Hom points out later in this issue, we have also seen a number of political battles being fought out through struggles over time, in ways that suggest a shift in how political time is regulated and experienced. Hom shows that time is not an objective metaphysical dimension which we can do nothing about. It is – just like place and space – a very human construction that we imbue with meaning. And those meanings seem to be changing.

The ability to control time, to shape it to our own meanings and rhythms, is one of the ways in which inequality is lived and felt. This has been both reinforced and up-ended by Covid-19. The time of the pandemic has been elongated, stretchy, shapeless, while simultaneously (for many) contracted, rushed, full. While some working lives have been brought to a standstill by furlough or redundancy, others have accelerated to meet the relentless demand for parcels, food deliveries, medical procedures. Social activities have dwindled, while caring responsibilities expanded.

While these experiences are inescapably racialised, classed and gendered, the disconcerting sense of living at an unfamiliar tempo has been widespread.

While we are all living in the heightened time of emergency, it is an emergency that requires most of us to contract our activities. To look after ourselves and those we live with. To stay at home. It is difficult to square this domestic-scale emergency of waiting with the usual temporal orientations of left politics. Even in striking, when we withdraw our labour and industriousness, we dedicate our time to coming together and creating a politics of community. As Cathy Elliott's account of the recent UCU strikes attests, the work of the picket line is often creative and busy in ways that seemed bigger than, although reminiscent of, the small-scale work of taking care of each other in the pandemic.

Yet, even in this suspended time, the racist violence and brutality that permeates our society did not pause. This is its own kind of emergency, and it requires an urgent response. As a number of the contributions in this issue explore in detail, whilst so many were longing for the restoration of the 'normal time' of the pre-pandemic, the status quo ante has itself long been intolerable. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests of the summer demonstrated viscerally that this was an issue that could not wait – even at risk of contracting a much-dreaded virus that seems to be harming black and brown people at higher rates. Staying at home to save our health services made little sense in a world in which a Black medical worker, Breonna Taylor, could be killed as she rested in bed. The protests were also shaped by time in the most brutally bodily way: the 8 mins 46 seconds in which George Floyd struggled and then ceased to breathe.

Michael Flexer and Lisa Baraitser remind us that not only the BLM movement but the slogan 'I can't breathe' pre-existed the pandemic. So too did the call to confront the long legacies of racial injustice embedded in our imperial past. Yet it was only in the particular moment of Covid time – with its suspension of business-as-usual, and its shared experience of fatal breathlessness – that the movement was able to bring these conjoined histories of colonialism, capitalism and incarceration into the open.

As Hannah Elias shows, our ideas about time themselves have a history and it is a history that is intimately linked with racist ideologies. She therefore suggests that the demands from BLM for better representation of Black history on the curriculum at school and university cannot be restricted simply to adding more topics or different authors. The current curriculum privileges a narrative history of Britain as an 'island story' that denies deep and longstanding imbrication with other parts of the world and implies a continuous history of a single, separate people. Elias suggests that truly to understand the past we need to learn and teach in a hetero-chronic mode, showing that history has never been linear but is rather characterised by multiple crisscrossing flows, pulses and sudden stops in and of time.

Kavita Maya meanwhile shows how the politics of place and the politics of time are intimately connected and how both are racialised. The countryside has not become

a White space by chance, or because it was always inherently so. It is premised not on an historical absence of black and brown bodies, but on their exploitation. Country houses were built on the abuse of racialised others. And the heritage experiences they offer today centre a distinctly White experience of time – positioned as a retreat from the frenzy of *multicultural* urban life. This romanticisation of, and nostalgia for, a pre-colonial rural idyll, always understood as White, casts people of colour out from the countryside and always imagines them elsewhere, whether in space or time. These exclusions are doubly painful because they exclude people of colour from the human desire to be in touch with nature and the outdoors, whilst also denying and erasing the violent, colonial history that made the countryside look the way it does.

Flexer and Baraitser ask us to use the suspended time of the pandemic to think more deeply about these histories of modernity and the way that they continue to structure our society. Alongside the legacies of racism and slavery, they point to further ongoing injustices of the long capitalist epoch, such as extraction of rent, precarious employment, long working hours, gender inequality and domestic violence. The disruption to the relentless progression of ordinary political and economic time has enabled us to notice and to *care*. It has opened up a moment of political possibility.

Politics is always about the ability to control time. And this has been made particularly visible in the politics of Brexit. While this particular kind of crisis time – with its looming deadlines – was briefly eclipsed by the exigencies of lockdown, it never went away. Debates and briefings about trade deals, infrastructure and the end of the transition period re-emerged in the summer. Yet, as Hom argues, the ticking of clocks is not some metaphysical process beyond human control: clocks are simply human devices that we use to order and make sense of processes and sequences of events. And political processes are also something we time: we are not helpless sailors adrift on the sea of time, but rather deliberate steerers, managers and administrators of time, using various practices of timing to advance our agendas and order the world to our political advantage. And Hom also argues, these techniques are not the preserve of elites. It is open to all of us to impose our own meaning on time and to use it to structure our responses to political events. This is an under-analysed source of political power.

These are techniques which, as Heather McKnight shows, the Climate Strike movement has used to extraordinary effect. The very act of striking from school highlights the futility of ordinary markers of progression in a world which has no future. And yet, while this is a movement fuelled by intense anxiety, it has also managed to hold open the possibility of radical redemptive action. Imagining the future has become an act of utopianism rooted firmly in the present, in the politics of this year and the next. As Jonathan Symon's review of Holly Jean Buck's *After Geoengineering* shows, climate politics is also marked by its own temporal ideolo-

gies. Faced with the end of the line – even the end of human time – the green movement may have to embrace industrial technology on a massive scale. This is a techno-futurist response to climate emergency that will deploy industrial modernity to *create* the possibility of a future – in sharp contrast with the more familiar approach of *limiting* growth, *limiting* technology.<sup>1</sup>

If techno-futurism offers the possibility of escaping our fate, it will take more than technocracy to get us there. Luke Martell's analysis of Keir Starmer's first six months as Labour leader argues that he needs to transcend the empty politics of technocratic competence if he is to truly unite the party – and the country – around an ambitious and substantive programme, including the Green New Deal. Starmer's emphasis on being 'competent, credible' indicates his intention to return the party to a more 'normal' sense of forward-looking parliamentary time (albeit in extraordinary times!) after the disruptive temporality of the Corbyn years.<sup>2</sup> In his first party conference speech as leader, Starmer insisted that the party understand the years since 2010 as the frustrating dead time of opposition, in which it had been unable to carry out the work of changing lives, or to add to its legacy of legislative achievements. In contrast, as Lisa Baraitser has discussed elsewhere, Corbyn's leadership was premised on the idea of anachronism, of ideas that had been consigned to the past suddenly, unexpectedly, bursting into the front line of politics.<sup>3</sup> Those on the left of the party who did not identify with the party's linear narrative of progress since the 1980s experienced the New Labour governments as themselves a time of waiting. Starmer's leadership, then, might be understood as a disruption to the temporality of Corbynism, more than to its political or policy direction.

Yet these categories are not as stable as we might like to think. Rajiv Prabhakar explores the possibilities of turning a rather different political anachronism to very practical and contemporary ends. The Child Trust Funds established by New Labour are reaching maturity as we write. Prabhakar suggests that these offer a way of making emergency payments to the current generation of 18-year-olds, who have been hit particularly hard by the economic effects of the pandemic. This is very far from the original intentions of the policy-makers, and a beautiful illustration of the possibilities offered by the unpredictable, non-linear paths that politics takes.

At the time of writing, we feel as if we are in a Covid-19 fever dream, awaiting the outcome of President Trump's illness – and by extension that of the whole White House – not to mention the election, the progress of the vaccine, the encroaching second surge of infections. History no longer feels (if it ever did) like the linear narrative that was taught at school, but more like an ever-accelerating merry-go-round. The music on the ride is playing faster and faster. By the time of publication, we might know some of the outcomes, but not the ending.

As Hom suggests, though, this should not imply a sense of helplessness. We are not about to be dashed on the rocks by time. Timing is something we *do*, not an abstract

force that commands us. He reminds us of the lesson the Reverend Al Sharpton taught us at George Floyd's memorial: that we need to re-time our racialised and unequal relationships by facing up to the horrors of history, by debunking linear narratives of a progressive and civilising story, by changing the tempo and retiming the present to call time's up on the injustices that persist. If timing is something we do, if political struggles are won and lost in time as well as space, if history shapes the present by holding us in the grip of certain narratives and erasing others, then we have plenty to do to hold open the possibility of different times in the future.

This might be as simple as eschewing progressive narratives that assume that we already know the desirable endpoint of the story. It might mean embracing the uncertainties of deliberation, listening and building community – time-consuming and uncertain as this may be; or the careful work of retelling our national and international stories in new lights, and of sitting with the discomfort this unearths. In the relentless rush to Build Back Better, those whose lives have remained relatively intact need to stay with those who would otherwise be left behind – those whose livelihoods have been deemed 'unviable', those shielding for the long term, those marginalised by racism, those floored by grief. And, if this were not enough, there is also the work of holding open the possibility for a human future on the most existential level.

There is plenty to do, and we need to be adept in managing the time, so we are not too busy to think and care, and so we can avoid the drama of the cliff edge.

We need to make time.

**Cathy Elliott** is a Lecturer in Political Science at UCL and a commissioning editor of *Renewal*.

**Emily Robinson** is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Sussex and co-editor of *Renewal*.

## Notes

1. Also see Alyssa Battistoni, 'The politics of climate crisis', *Renewal*, Vol 28 No 2, 2020; Adrienne Buller, 'Where next for the Green New Deal', *Renewal*, Vol 28 No 1, 2020; Harpreet Kaur Paul, 'The Green New Deal and global justice', *Renewal*, Vol 28 No 1, 2020.
2. Keir Starmer, speech to Labour Party Conference, Doncaster, 22 September 2020: <https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/keir-starmer-speech-full-text-labour-leader-conference-2020-address-today-doncaster-655612>.
3. Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, Bloomsbury 2017, pp23-4.