As you like it: the movement *is* the moment

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The current disruptions, suspensions and hiatuses of everyday life have forced us to think more carefully about time: both the specific moment we are experiencing – the coming together of Covid-19 and the urgent call for racial justice by the BLM movement – and the way moments operate together, contemporaneously and over longer historical time. The relationship between time – *the moment* – and the potential for actions within that time – *the movement* – opens up political possibilities.

> The Black Lives Matter movement, or moment if you like ...
>
> Keir Starmer, 30 June 2020

> This is not a moment for not standing with the Black Lives Matter movement
>
> Keir Starmer, 2 July 2020[1]

> Scratch that, this is not a moment, it's the movement. Where all the hungriest brothers with something to prove went?
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> 'My Shot', *Hamilton: An American Musical*[2]

A quick look in the dictionary might have alleviated some embarrassment for the new leader of the Labour Party, attacked by critics on the right and left for his 'misspeaking' about the global Black Lives Matter protests that had taken on renewed momentum in response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor,

Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade and Dion Johnson between the months of February and May 2020. The concepts of movement and moment are closely connected: the word moment comes from the Latin *momentum* meaning: (i) movement, moving power (ii) importance, consequence (iii) moment of time, particle.[3] The moment and the movement are unavoidably bound up in each other; the moment of time is required for movement, but similarly it is the movement that may constitute the moment. Importance and consequence, as the definition suggests, are what make otherwise empty time somehow momentous. Unless you are interested in a purely technical model of time – breaking the continuous into discrete measurements – from this perspective it is action that gives time its sequence.

Movements, in other words, give motion to the moments of time. Medieval European standards of time reflected this: miniscule, essential, yet unusable 'atoms' of time comprised 'moments' and ten such 'moments' made up a 'point', with four 'points' in turn making up the hour. A 'moment', then, as a measure of time was somewhere between one and two minutes, depending on the time of year. It's an anachronistic pun, but it's fair to say that true moments always build towards a point.

Movement or moment or both, Black Lives Matter mobilised after the murder of George Floyd on a greater scale than after the shooting of Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. The murder by police of Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York on 17 July 2014, resulting from a strangulating chokehold similar to that which killed George Floyd, had already led to the adoption by protestors and activists of the slogan 'I can't breathe'. The chokehold itself has been identified as a murder and restraint technique used by police forces all over the US, since the 1970s. In a five-year period in the 1980s, the LAPD murdered 14 black Americans using this method.[4] Tracing this brief history illustrates the dynamic relationship between movements and moments, and helps us to understand how the temporal qualities and consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic have acted to throw political issues into startling and sudden relief.

Black Lives Matter, as a movement, existed prior to 2020. So too did the slogan 'I can't breathe'. And prior to and contemporaneous with this is the long history of murder, incarceration, enslavement and exploitation of black Americans; the equally long history of British colonialism and imperialism; and, within Britain itself, the ongoing disproportionate incarceration and mistreatment by the police of people of colour, which ultimately led to the symbolic toppling of Edward Colston's statue into Bristol Harbour in July. What then brought these together to form an historical moment? What was there in that moment that made events move, and form a more extensive movement, in ways and places they hadn't in 2014? And will this moment and movement last? How might we apprehend the undertow that will pull this movement back towards stasis, a form of temporal suspension in which moment and movement become uncoupled once more?

Covid time

Obviously, there was a remarkably powerful resonance that couldn't have occurred at another moment. The murder by strangulation of a black American in the midst of a deadly global illness that disproportionately took the lives (and the breath) of the working classes, people of colour and those suffering from structural health inequalities (not three discrete groups) resonated in each area of the globe. George Floyd's breath was taken from him – physically forced out of his body – at the same moment that much of the world was holding its breath, caught up in a mighty pause of social and productive relations thanks to SARS-CoV-2 and the varying state reactions to the illness it produced. It was a moment simultaneously of excess time and stolen time: people lost events that mark time – weddings, birthdays, funerals; while the differentiated, meaningful moments in which they were supposed to occur were also swallowed up into a larger, all-encompassing mass of lockdown time, a time without real moments, it seemed.

A moment to catch your breath can mean the difference between life and death, literally and figuratively. Covid-19 doesn't just obliterate breath; it obliterates the moment of breath, the time it takes to breathe. As the pandemic arrived, and the virus transformed from a dangerous metabolic reaction between some errant strands of viral RNA and the cells in human lungs and hearts into a social, economic and political phenomenon, that is, an *event*, it transformed social and productive relations on a global scale. In becoming social, and entering into social and productive time, Covid-19 created what we might term the viral time of lockdown.[5] For many, this viral time meant a sudden and near-absolute suspension of time and the actions that constitute time; an end to moments and movements, and the setting in of the elongated temporalities of waiting, staying indoors if one could, enduring time as it failed to unfold. For others – the frontline health workers; the supermarket staff; the drivers of delivery vans and buses – it meant a density or thickening of time and a surfeit of action; each moment and each movement was freighted with unprecedented existential risk.

Everyone was pushed to confront, as the philosopher Achille Mbembe called it, the 'hour of autophagy', the moment in which it is no longer possible to delegate one's own death to others, for another person to die in one's own place. If the history of colonialism, slavery and imperialism is the history of this displacement of one's own death onto indigenous others, slaves and the natural world (including viruses), then the hour of autophagy brought about by this conjoined moment of Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter is that of recognising the universal right to breathe. Mbembe writes:

> It is one thing to worry about the death of others in a distant land and quite another to suddenly become aware of one's own putrescence, to be forced to live intimately with one's own death, contemplating it as a real possibility.

> Such is, for many, the terror triggered by confinement: having to finally answer for one's own life, to one's own name.[6]

We write as part of a research group working on time and healthcare. The Waiting Times project had collectively been thinking about the elongated yet animated time of care before Covid-19 arrived, with its unevenly distributed dams and oceans of time. The project aims to understand waiting for, and indeed *in*, healthcare as not just a cruel form of social abandonment (although there is no doubt that lengthening waiting lists and times are the result of an overall slowdown of government spending on healthcare, an ageing population with complex needs, and a collapse in social care at local levels due to the 'austerity' policies of the last decade); it also understands this waiting as an offer of care. When a GP says 'let's wait to see how this situation develops' it is not always a fob off; at times it is a form of care-ful attention, just as the waiting that occurs in palliative care is a form of waiting *with*, rather than waiting for, that 'makes time' at the end of life.[7] Waiting, in fact, is at the core of all healthcare practices, a kind of 'hovering and adjusting';[8] even Boris Johnson had to acknowledge that this had saved his life.[9] Yet it's hard to think critically and carefully about time and care inside of time's suspension.

Under conditions of lockdown, time began to force a type of thinking on us. Just as we are never really aware of our heads until we have a headache, we don't feel time until it is disrupted. 'Trauma' is often the term we grasp for when we experience a fundamental form of temporal disruption. The day a loved one dies expands to fill years, and bends the time around it with the superdensity of a black hole. Viral time offered us a collective trauma time, but the moment of trauma looked for matter to fill it. And it found plenty. The horrors of an undead capitalism in perpetual crisis could now be seen from a new perspective. We were both looking after, and overlooking, our social and productive relations from outside everyday time. The moment – a wide open expanse, at first seemingly barren, despairingly so – brought with it the possibilities of movement. We had to take time – the time pushed on us – and taking time, taking *the* time, precipitated a different way of taking care. It was this viral time that allowed for the moment to move, or for the movement to have its moment, and for all the components to enter into a dynamic that saw fires rage, statues toppled and voices heard. Somehow, the stopping of time, the destruction of time, also became a making of time, and the making of a moment and a movement.

There's no place (or time) for the Tower of the Past in the Marxist totality

The murder of George Floyd became a trauma that we could all – if we chose – attend to or take care of, in this moment that lay open for it. For those of us furloughed, or working from home, or upended from our old routines in some other way, we had the privilege of time to turn our eyes and our thoughts to the

economic and physical acts of violence perpetrated against specifically black bodies. An almost immediate memorial at the site of Floyd's murder declared his death a shared trauma: 'this is our collective PTSD'.[10] And conversely, the shared trauma of black Americans and people of colour more generally became expressed in this moment. It was not that Floyd's murder reminded us of the horrors of the slave trade, or even that the metaphor of being unable to breathe naturally extended from the symptoms of Covid-19, disproportionately suffered by the poorest, through to the chokehold techniques of the forces of state oppression, onto the thousands of black slaves thrown from Edward Colston's ships to drown in the Atlantic. It was, rather, that these could be seen as being the same inequality, the same strangulation, played out at the grander, deeper, slower tempo of history.

So, it is not the case that the so-called 'moment' of Black Lives Matter is simply a settling of historic scores, a symbolic righting of wrongs from another epoch. However, this is exactly how the right deliberately chooses to misunderstand it, throwing up pseudo-questions about whether we should dismantle barely standing Roman antiquities because the Roman Empire was built on slavery. The difference is that we are still within the *longue durée* – economically and politically – in which national (and local and individual) wealth was made from the Atlantic slave trade. If the wealth, as benefit, endures, so does the offence of slavery.

More than this though, the exploitation of forced, if not formally indentured, labour endures as a part of the current capitalist organisation. To fail to extend the moment of Black Lives Matter diachronically to the moments of slavery that generated the wealth of the city of Bristol, and synchronically to the forced labour of American workfare programmes or of Chinese camps where members of the oppressed Uyghur minority make Victoria's Secret lingerie, is to refuse to view our economic, political system in its entangled entirety, to refuse the conjoining of moments both simultaneous (the child labourer in Bangladesh, the uninsured working-class American, the people of colour on the frontlines of public transport and healthcare dying in the UK) and longitudinal (the deaths of the middle passage, the whippings of the cotton fields, and the lynchings of reconstruction). It is a refusal to truly take care, to take notice, to attend. It is a refusal of waiting *with* the traumas and traumatised.

We are encouraged to refuse to do this careful thinking. As Frantz Fanon, the socialist psychiatrist and post-colonialist thinker says, we are encouraged to banish these traumas to the Tower of the Past.[11] According to the very same people enjoying the trickled-down affluence of British colonial wealth, the Atlantic slave trade was all a 'long time ago'. Even the violence and bigotry of Notting Hill in the 1950s or the stop and search abuses of the 1980s, these comfortable folk argue, should be set aside as ancient history. Something done and dusted. Not live.

The double standard becomes apparent if we stop to consider how billions are made from the IPOs of unprofitable companies like Uber on the basis of the future

profitability of as-yet non-existent products and services, like driverless cars. If real money is made now on the basis of a fictional future lying decades ahead, how can we not talk about the real money made decades ago from labour exploitation tied to racial and gender inequalities? If a hedge fund can cash in now on the imagined profits of the driverless cars of 2050, why can't a woman of colour present a bill for her and her mother and her grandmothers' decades of unwaged reproductive labour? Why can't former British colonies in Africa have their reparations for the years of imperialist plunder? These moments are within the same economic enmeshment, the same totality. As French historian of the mid-twentieth century Fernand Braudel put it, current reality is not one thing but a collage of these different temporal points:

> Each 'current reality' is the conjoining of movements with different origins and rhythms. The time of today is composed simultaneously of the time of yesterday, of the day before yesterday, and of bygone days.[12]

Marx offers us a model of temporality, and of the dynamic systems of capitalism as composed of moments. Outside the flow of history, but within the flow of a time of capital, these are the moments within the movements of capital: the individual moves from the moment of labour, to the moment of consumption, to the moment of social reproduction, and so on. Similarly, this model of moments within a complex and dynamic system of systems can be used to understand the structure of history itself. Accounts untethered from an historical analysis or coherent political programme collapse into a narrative of good capitalism versus bad capitalism.

But we could add to this Michel Serres's account of history, which challenges the idea that contemporaneity supersedes what comes to be viewed as outmoded patterns of thought.[13] Instead of adopting a model of a line of history (something he identifies as inherently violent), he argues that what is rendered outmoded can be brought into contiguity with the contemporary moment in such a way that the very anachronism of the outmoded produces a new political reality. Think of the re-introduction of what were embarrassingly out-of-date terms like 'rent regulation', the 're-nationalisation of the railways' and 'scrapping Trident' that were the backdrop to the political discourses of the 1980s, reanimated during Corbyn's leadership campaign in 2015. This can be seen as a process of reanimation of what is presumed dead, what 'plays dead';[14] it literally 'makes time', by releasing the time in which such ideas were efficacious into the present, a time that had been stored, locked-up, within the supposedly anachronistic ideas.

This is not the same as turning back the clock. One worrying trend in soft left politics is the feelgood invocation of the London Olympics opening ceremony in 2012, or the second electoral victory of Barack Obama, or the liberal fantasy of US race and immigration relations epitomised in *Hamilton*, without any real sense of how the moments of 2012 – or 1997 for that matter – were (and are) parts of a temporal structure leading inevitably to the shocks, crises and disasters of 2016-2020.[15] Fanon

correctly warns us that a simple acceptance of either the past or the present are each paths to the same situation of alienation and, by extension, oppression.

Within an historical framework produced by reading Marx and Serres together, we can understand that it is the unfinished projects of the past that survive, so that the past and the present are not two separate moments, but related within a *longue durée* of global capitalism that we might consider as stretching from the colonial, imperial expansions of the second half of the eighteenth century up to our present moment, and beyond. Moments within this elongated time can be brought into contiguous contact with one another, precisely as the Black Lives Matter movement has done.

This extended temporal framework is also the context for, and the system that produced, the labour movement, and our Labour Party. The relevance of the enduring existence of the Labour Party is predicated on understanding that the problems of the capitalist epoch remain unsolved and yet are still pressing; and that Labour has a role in the caretaking of its own history – and history as such – through its capacity to 'go on going on' about what still presses in from the past.

A moment for ethical care-taking: for the silent not the noisy

There was a time for demonstrating a 'taking care', and a chauvinist might say that time has been lost in the UK. Whilst the prime minister floundered and fluffed his Churchillian moment, the newly anointed leader of the opposition could be criticised for equally having failed to take what this moment offered. What appears as a strategy of technocratic aloofness, and lawyer-istic nitpicking at details whilst leaving the fundamentals uncommented upon, may turn out to be uniquely ill-suited to the juncture he found himself within.[16]

The kind of 'taking care' we are proposing, however, does not have to conform to any particular ideal of care-taking. What we are calling 'viral time' actually refutes the idea that time has been lost. It disrupts the very temporal framework that would permit of 'too late' or 'too early'. In viral time, care-taking occurs in the time when time explicitly doesn't run in the way that it did. The time of care doesn't run out, as such, but runs on, extended yet suspended – it is the permanent capacity to begin again.[17] When we stop thinking in terms of being too late or too soon, we see that we have been given a time for taking time. A time of an active waiting, holding and containing – a time in which the unthinkable can be thought. The four-day week, universal basic income, the Green New Deal. These are ideas that have been there, patiently waiting their time.

The capacity to notice that moments have their movement is therefore an act of care. Paying careful attention to the possibility of movement in the moment is a practice we on the left have been cultivating since the late eighteenth century. The universal pause brought about by the temporal disruption of Covid-19 has given us

the time to take that care, to take up questions of the extraction of rent, of precarious employment, of the battle between labour and capital over working hours, of structural racism and slavery, of gender inequality and the violence meted out largely by men on women and children in the supposed safety of the family unit. These problems never went away, they belong to our strung-out epoch. It is only that the time that Covid-19 forced on us allowed them to return to light.

Rather than the macho politics of claiming to solve, kill off, and lock down such injustices, we recommend a different strategy of response: taking care. This means, as the title of Donna Haraway's 2016 monograph has it, 'staying with the trouble'.[18] It also means listening to silent or silenced voices:

> Do not believe that only those actors who make noise are the most authentic. There are others who matter but who are silent. But did we not all know this already?[19]

By attending to the silent, and by staying with the trouble, we allow the present moment to bring forth its movements for a better world.

Movement or moment, as you like it, it is here and now, in the mobilisations of Black Lives Matter, in the economic hiatus and the coming catastrophes and collapses caused by viral time. The premises of now – the long *now* of the capitalist epoch – are bringing forth the movements and moments that will shift the present state of things. Solidarity means being with the trouble, the trauma, listening to all that has gone before and all that is going on in the different moments around us. Whatever name we give it, it is time for the Labour Party and the labour movement to take the time, to take a breath, and to take care-ful action.

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Notes

1 BBC, 'Black Lives Matter: Sir Keir Starmer "regrets" calling movement a "moment"', 2 July 2020: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-53267989.

2 Lin-Manuel Miranda, 'My Shot', *Hamilton: An American Musical*, 2015.
3 *New Shorter OED*, 1993.
4 David Correia and Tyler Wall, *Police: A Field Guide*, Verso 2018, p64.
5 Michael J. Flexer, 'Having a moment: the revolutionary semiotic of COVID-19', *Wellcome Open Research*, 5:134, 2020: https://doi.org/10.12688/wellcomeopenres.15972.1
6 Achille Mbembe, 'The universal right to breathe', translated by C. Shread, *Critical Inquiry*, 13 April 2020: https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/the-universal-right-to-breathe/, accessed 18 July 2020.
7 K. Anucha, L. Baraitser, S. Davies, M.J. Flexer, D. Robinson, 'Investigating waiting: Interdisciplinary thoughts on researching elongated temporalities in healthcare settings', in Bryan Cliff et al (eds), *Temporality in Qualitative Inquiry: Theories, methods, practices*, Routledge 2020.
8 María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*, University of Minnesota Press 2017.
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10 Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, '8 minutes, 46 seconds became a symbol in George Floyd's death. The exact time is less clear', *New York Times*, 18 June 2020: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/18/us/george-floyd-timing.html.
11 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by C. L. Markmann, Pluto 1986, p226.
12 Fernand Braudel, 'History and the Social Sciences: The Long Durée', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, translated by I. Wallerstein, Vol 36 No 2, 2009 (p182).
13 Michel Serre, *Rome: The Book of Foundations*, Stanford University Press 1991.
14 See Elizabeth Freeman, *Beside You in Time: Sense Methods and Queer Sociabilities in the American Nineteenth Century*, Duke University Press 2019.
15 To read James Bloodworth's *Hired: Six Months Undercover in Low-Wage Britain* (Atlantic Books 2018), for instance, is to be in an imaginary world where the UK was a workers' paradise until the advent of the Deliveroo app.
16 Not, ultimately, that this might fatally wound his chances of winning any election. Starmer enjoys the double premium of being neither Boris Johnson nor Jeremy Corbyn when facing an electorate comprised exclusively of voters who despise one, other or both of those people.
17 Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, Bloomsbury 2017.
18 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press 2016.
19 Braudel, p187.