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Covid-19 and the politics of temporality: constructing credibility in coronavirus discourse

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The designation of, and response to, specific issues as security challenges is neither self-evident nor inevitable (e.g. Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde 1998). Causes of harm must be constructed or performed as security issues to become thus; responses to (constructed) challenges must, in turn, be communicated or ‘sold’ to relevant audiences (Doty 1993; Holland 2013). In this piece, I attempt to show that this is as true of pandemics as it is of other (better-studied) threats from terrorism to nuclear proliferation. I do so by considering the UK government’s discursive response to the COVID-19 coronavirus, paying particular attention to the framing of governmental action within official problematisations thereof. The piece draws on a wider research project investigating UK political language across the first six months of this crisis.¹

My argument, in brief, is that a repeated, and multi-faceted, claim to governmental credibility was vital to British political discourse on this pandemic. Consider the 7 April description of the Cabinet by the Foreign Secretary, then deputising for the hospitalised Prime Minister: ‘his team will not blink, and we will not flinch from the task at hand at this crucial moment. We will keep all of our focus and all of our resolve, with calm determination on delivering the government’s plan to defeat the coronavirus’ (Raab 2020a). Raab’s comments demonstrate two crucial generative claims within this construction of governmental credibility upon which I focus in this piece. These claims are, first, to the diligence of the executive, and, second, to its competence. Engaging with these claims, I suggest, offers two contributions to our understanding of this still unfolding crisis. First, it provides empirical understanding of the discursive framing of governmental activity during a moment of profound national and international significance. Second, it enables theoretical insight into the importance of constructions of temporality – constructions of time – within the politics of security more widely (see also Jarvis 2009; Stevens 2016). Let us consider the two claims in turn.

First, as indicated in Raab’s above comments, great emphasis was put on governmental diligence throughout this crisis. Common constructions of assiduousness included the detailing of repetitive executive activity – ‘From tomorrow daily press conferences will be hosted, [these] … form part of the government’s commitment to clarity and transparency’ (Number 10, 2020a) – and assurances of vigilance in emergency planning – ‘a new daily C-19 meeting … will be chaired by the Prime Minister’ (Number 10, 2020b). Such accounts dovetailed with more idiomatic claims to the ceaselessness of governmental work during this crisis: ‘Thousands of brilliant officials are already working round the clock but we must do more and faster’ (Johnson 2020a), and, ‘We are throwing everything at it, heart and soul, night and day’ (Johnson 2020b). And, importantly, with assurances the alacrity of government decision-making and action, evident, for instance, in the Prime Minister’s comments of 17 March 2020: ‘we are doing all we can and as quickly as we can to increase the capacity of the NHS’ (Johnson 2020a).

This constructed industriousness links to our second claim to credibility focused on governmental *competence* throughout this crisis. Important here was the repeated referencing of

a readiness for exceptional, even unprecedented, action as appropriate to the circumstances, for instance: 'we announced ... steps yesterday ... advising against all unnecessary contact ... that are unprecedented since World War Two' (Johnson 2020a); 'we have taken unprecedented action to support our economy, to save jobs and secure livelihoods' (Sharma 2020a); and, 'We are ... taking unprecedented action to increase NHS capacity' (Sharma 2020b). This constructed courageousness was linked, importantly, to a claim to the timeliness of governmental decision-making: 'As we've said consistently from the outset, it is vital we take the right decisions at the right time' (Raab 2020b), and, 'we have been deliberate in our actions – taking the right steps at the right time' (Raab 2020c). Yet, although these constructions of exceptionalism and timeliness contribute to a shared performance of competence, the latter also nuances the former through referencing the nuances of political judgement and – where necessary – restraint. As the Prime Minister noted of the easing of restrictions instituted during the UK's first national 'lockdown' beginning 23 March 2020, the UK could anticipate points in this crisis when: 'we must move slowly, and at the right time' (Johnson 2020d).

Taken together, the above examples are illustrative of a relatively consistent performance of governmental credibility forged from a series of claims to diligence and competence. These claims, as we have seen, depict a government that was: (i) working daily, (ii) around the clock, and (iii) with alacrity, to (iv) take unprecedented, yet (v) circumstantially appropriate, action. As such, these claims are all fundamentally *temporal*, in that they concern the (i) regularity, (ii) duration, (iii) speed, (iv) novelty, and (v) timeliness of governmental activity during this crisis. This centrality of temporal claims to the government's narration of its own response to COVID-19 is important, although not unexpected. As Paul Ricoeur (1990, 3) argues, 'The world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world [and] ... narrative, in turn is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience'. It is through narrative, put otherwise, that 'scattered events' (Ricoeur 1990, X) – pasts, presents and futures – become rendered meaningful through their (contingent) integration into 'whole and complete stor[ies]' (Ricoeur 1990, X).

If we look closer at the above examples, however, things become more complicated and more interesting because we encounter two distinct metaphors of temporality within this composite performance of credibility (see Torre 2007). On the one hand – in constructions of diligence through reference to the regularity, ceaselessness and speediness of activity – we encounter time's construction as a *resource* available to (here, political) actors in their conduct. Time, produced thus, exists as something that must be (or is being) used maximally, and therefore productively, in the management of this crisis. No hour, no day will be lost by the government; no time will be wasted through political hesitancy. In the constructions of competence through claims to the unprecedented and timely nature of governmental activity, on the other hand, we encounter time instead as an external *environment* in which political action is located. Here, the response to COVID-19 is situated against or embedded within an exterior temporal framework; one that enables the identification of historical similarities and differences (in claims to uniqueness), while also structuring the appropriateness of specific activities (in claims to timeliness).

Following Torre (2007), the first of these conceptions of time – as a resource – is important because it highlights political agency during this (narrated) crisis. It does so by depicting a government committed to, and competent in, the mastery of (all) available time. This depiction of an industrious, diligent executive, offered important discursive resources for responding to prominent criticisms of governmental inaction and hesitancy; criticisms that accompanied decisions around, *inter alia*, the timing of national lockdowns, the closure of schools, and the delayed institution of an adequate test and trace system for monitoring the virus' spread.² In this sense, the metaphor has productivity for storying the government as a purposive, and likely gendered, actor efficiently consuming time to bring about progressive change in the UK's current/future encounter with COVID-19. It also imbues the content of the UK's response with a legitimacy derived from a determined, unceasing commitment to the shaping of that response.

The second metaphor – of time as an environment – has a contrasting, more explicitly structural, emphasis when compared with the construction of time as a resource. Here, the focus is on unprecedented external events encumbering the government's efforts at resolving this crisis, and the impressiveness of this response against such an unstable and unpredictable background. This metaphor once more helps construct the government as a rational political actor. It does so, though, through highlighting the congruence between circumstance and action, rather than foregrounding the maximally efficient use of (temporal) resources. It also serves to counter accusations of political error – rather than inaction – through its emphasis on the difficult exterior circumstances confronting the UK government. In the Prime Minister's words, for example: 'When this began, we hadn't seen this disease before, and we didn't fully understand its effects' (Johnson 2020c). This construction, then, both differs from and complements that above by situating the response to COVID-19 within a politics of exceptionality in which a courageous, risk-taking executive is positioned as the appropriate and necessary antidote to this virus.

The importance of temporal claims in the articulation and legitimisation of the UK response to COVID-19 should, perhaps, come as little surprise. Politics – of security, and, indeed, anything else – is an inescapably temporal activity (Stevens 2016); as Debray (cited in Hay 1999, 319) neatly summarises: 'time is to politics what space is to geometry'. The above constructions of credibility within official governmental discourse, therefore, far from exhaust the importance of temporality to this specific 'crisis' (see Jarvis 2020); a term, let us remember, with its own fundamentally temporal etymology (Hay 1999, 323). My argument in this brief intervention is simply that to understand the politics of COVID-19 we must engage with the politics of temporality, including the work that is done by temporal claims in producing, explaining, contextualising, and justifying political identities and actions. The above reflections, I hope, offer a starting point towards this.

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Notes

1. The project concentrated on British governmental discourse on the COVID-19 coronavirus through to 23 June 2020: the termination of the government's daily press briefings. The corpus was collected directly from the official website of the Prime Minister's office, hosted at www.gov.uk. Every text referencing the virus on the website was included for analysis, generating 121 different sources with an aggregated length of over 77,000 words. Related, forthcoming, publications from this work focus on topics including the government's use of numbers and mathematical language in this crisis; the positioning of the novel coronavirus within diverse temporal imaginaries; and constructions of legitimacy within the political response to COVID-19.
2. As the leader of the opposition, Keir Starmer, argued in December 2020: 'We have a prime minister who is so scared of being unpopular that he is incapable of taking tough decisions until it is too late ... It is this indecision and weak leadership that is costing lives and it is costing jobs' (in Devlin 2020).

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