

Constructing the coronavirus crisis:

narratives of time in british political discourse on COVID-19ⁱ

This article explores the importance of constructions of temporality within the UK government's discourse on the COVID-19 coronavirus across the first six months of 2020. Drawing on over 120 official texts, it traces the emergence of discontinuous, linear, and cyclical conceptions of time in representations of the virus' pasts, presents, and futures. Three arguments are made. First, constructions of temporality were fundamental to the social, political, and historical positioning of this virus. Second, these constructions were constitutively important in producing, explaining, justifying and celebrating, the UK government's response to the virus. And, third, tensions and inconsistencies between these constructions of temporality highlight the contingent, and constructed, character of official discourse, pulling into question the inevitability of the UK's response and opening opportunity for critical intervention.

Key words: COVID-19; coronavirus; time; temporality; discourse; British politics

On 27 April 2020, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson addressed the public for the first time since his hospitalisation from the COVID-19 pandemic that was sweeping across the world (Johnson 2020j). Johnson's address moved powerfully between the personal and the political; the Prime Minister's own recent recovery from the coronavirus providing a productive metonym for his cautiously optimistic narrative of national resilience. Less obvious, perhaps, but as vital to this narrative's construction, were a series of important, but distinct, claims about temporality: about time. In a statement lasting less than nine minutes, Johnson conceptualised time both as a resource for the satisfaction of (here unmet) needs – apologising for his being 'away from my desk for much longer than I would've liked' – and as collectively-experienced duration, arguing 'we are passing through the peak' of the pandemic (see also Jarvis 2021). He drew upon familiar, and powerful, temporal metaphors to emphasise COVID-

19's historical significance, depicting this 'crisis'ⁱⁱ as the, 'Biggest single challenge this country has faced since the [second world] war'. And, he foretold the crisis' ultimate resolution, finally, via a familiar, but very specific, evolutionary tale of gradual, incremental gains against the virus – '*We are making progress* with fewer hospital admissions, fewer COVID patients in ICU' (Johnson 2020j; my emphasis).

In this article, I show that the pervasiveness of these powerful yet diverse constructions of temporality within Johnson's (2020j) statement was indicative of wider British executive discourse on this new coronavirus. I do this through an original analysis of UK governmental discourse on the threat posed by this virus throughout the first six months of 2020. Drawing on over 120 texts including speeches, press releases, policy statements and articles, I make three arguments. First, temporal claims such as those above were absolutely fundamental to the government's framing of COVID-19, working to situate this threat historically, socially, and politically. Second, such claims were politically productive: helping to explain, justify, and defend vital moments in the UK's efforts to manage this crisis. And, third, tensions and inconsistencies within the narration of temporality in this context shed important light on the contingent, and constructed, character of political discourse crises.

In making these arguments, the article offers three contributions to knowledge. First, *empirically*, it provides a descriptively detailed account of this emerging governmental discourse. This focus on a vital contemporary case, I suggest, adds to our understanding of how crises are interpreted, constructed, and governed by political elites through a contemporary case study of profound national and global importance. Second, *analytically*, it draws attention to the constitutive importance of temporal claims within security discourse, and their role, specifically, in the construction of political actions and identities. Third, *critically*, it pulls into question the coherence of the government's response by juxtaposing heterogeneous temporal claims against one another. That COVID-19's historical significance *and* likely future(s) were articulated inconsistently even in the relatively short period under analysis here indicates, I suggest, the contingent nature of this virus' discursive

construction(s). This, in turn, opens important opportunity for political dissent and critique (Ashley and Walker 1990: 385; Foucault 1988: 154-5).

The article begins by situating my analysis within existing scholarship on the politics of time. Here, I identify a growing and multifaceted engagement with temporality, before introducing the notion of 'narrative time' upon which this article draws (see Ricoeur 1980; Jarvis 2009). A second section introduces the framework methodology employed for the discursive analysis, reflecting on my identification and interpretation of key texts. The article's third, analytical, section then proceeds in two parts. It begins with an exploration of COVID-19's historical location as constructed in UK governmental discourse. Here, I identify the widespread depiction of this virus as an unprecedented crisis within the United Kingdom; one requiring a similarly unprecedented response often depicted as a 'new normalcy'. This construction of temporal discontinuity, I suggest, imposed appropriateness and coherence upon the government's actions while facilitating the celebration – and defence – of specific moments therein. The construction was also, however, problematised by references to important historical precedents and parallels for COVID-19, which drew upon quite different constructions of temporality as both a cyclical and linear process. The second part of the analytical section then turns to constructions of COVID-19's likely future development, in which I explore an epistemological ambiguity between confident and uncertain predictions, and a directional ambiguity between progressive and declinist accounts of the virus' future. I argue that executive discourse was capable of sustaining such distinct projections of the future because of the emphasis within it upon contingency and public responsibility. In the article's conclusion, finally, I argue for further attention to temporal articulations within political discourse in this context and beyond.

The politics of (narrative) time

Politics is a fundamentally, inescapably, temporal activity. Electoral cycles structure democratic decision-making according to public calendars (Goetz 2014). The business of legislatures proceeds via

daily, annual, and other timetables subject to political manoeuvring and manipulation (see Cohen 2018). National communities are imagined and contested through appeal to (dis)continuities of collective identity, and the remembering or forgetting of specific pasts (Billig 1995; Edkins 2003; Anderson 2006). Political executives take future-oriented decisions on behalf of their polities. And efforts to connect past, present, and future shape political debate on every conceivable policy agenda, from social welfare to national security and beyond (see Nowotny 102-131). Politics, in short, is perennially concerned with time (Stevens 2016: 1). Or, as Debray (cited in Hay 1999: 319) pithily puts it: 'time is to politics what space is to geometry'.

Given this importance, it is unsurprising that a significant academic literature has begun to emerge on the politics of time. Fundamental debates within political science revolve around competing conceptions of the dynamics, drivers, direction and tempo of continuity and change within political processes (Hay 2002: 135-167; Kerr 2002; Bell 2003; Pierson 2011). Feminist interventions interrogate the gendering of dominant frameworks for understanding and governing time (Kristeva 1981; Forman 1989; Bryson 2007). Postcolonial writers explore time's employment as a 'mechanism of colonization' in the subordination of languages, peoples and collective identities (Agathangelou and Killian 2016a: 13; also Vázquez 2009). Cultural analyses highlight the reproduction and remaking of temporalities within museums, popular music, videogames and beyond (e.g. Shapiro 2016; Jarvis and Robinson 2019). Some of the most influential social theorists owe their prominence, at least in part, to their critique of traditional theorisations of time (Gross 1982; Adam 1990; West-Pavlov 2013: 29-55). And, in International Relations, considerable recent work has gone into unpacking the temporal dimensions of global politics, evidenced in recent edited collections (Hom *et al* 2016; Agathangelou and Killian 2016b); special issues (Bertrand *et al* 2018); monographs (Jarvis 2009; Hutchings 2013; Stevens 2016; Hom 2020), and article contributions (e.g. Hutchings 2007; Hom 2018).

This sketch, of course, does scant justice to an important and growing literature (appropriately) riven with normative, theoretical, thematic, and methodological differences.

Collectively, though, this work forces us to take seriously the politics of time. Time, it demonstrates, is both producer and product of political intervention. It is constitutive of political identities, processes, and actions. *And* it is constituted, at least in part, precisely through political processes and actions. How this works in practice, moreover, varies dramatically across time and space (Sorokin and Merton 1937; Lewis and Weigart 1981; Nowotny 1992). It is only with the onset of the nineteenth century, for instance, that the linear timeline achieved its contemporary hegemony for the representation of history (West-Pavlov 2013: 67-68; see also White 1980).

This article seeks to build on this broad insight through analysis of the narration of time within the UK's management of the COVID-19 'crisis' in its early, intense stages. Drawing on existing work on 'narrative time' (Ricoeur 1980; 1984), it places especial emphasis on two key features within this discourse (see Jarvis 2009). First, is the chronological or episodic aspect of narrative construction in which specific events are identified as pertinent or relevant to an unfolding story. As demonstrated below, such events in this context included cases of the virus, scientific advances, government decisions, and moments of public participation. Second, is the configurational, emplotted, dimension of narrative, through which events are connected and construed into significant temporal patterns or 'wholes' (Ricoeur 1980: 178). This process of selection and fabrication, I argue, was constitutive of COVID-19's social reality; helping to impose meaning upon the virus, government strategy, the United Kingdom, and the British public. The UK government's employment of specific narrative times, moreover, was fundamental to the possibility and conceivability of the UK's response to this virus, militating against alternative understandings of COVID-19 and appropriate responses thereto (Doty 1993; Holland 2013).

My investigation into the production of narrative time within this discourse focuses, primarily, on the emergence of three 'chronotypes' (Bender and Wellbery 1991: 4) within official discourse, understood as coherent ways of conceptualising the 'shape' of temporality from emplotted events (see Graham 1997; Jarvis 2009; Hom 2018). First, is a construction of radically discontinuous time, in

which specific events are positioned as dramatic moments of rupture separating qualitatively distinct historical periods. Typical to this chronotype is the juxtaposition of an uninterrupted, stable horizon of 'old normality' against a 'new normal' of fundamentally different ways of being. Second, is a construction of linear time in which key events are plotted upon a unidirectional, cumulative dynamic of gradual change linking past, present, and future in a relatively meaningful, predictable 'path'. As demonstrated below, two related, but opposite, examples of this construction are evident within this discourse: a progressive, optimistic account of time as a dynamic of incremental improvement; and, a pessimistic account of incremental decline and future suffering. Third, is a construction of cyclical time, in which recurrence is emphasised over the radical or cumulative transformative patterns of the first two constructions. Time, here, is seen to repeat itself through meaningful precedents and historical equivalences, such that events experienced today are better understood as reincarnation than punctuation or transformation.

Before exploring these chronotypes, two notes of clarification are in order. First, I make no claim on the accuracy of any of these in relation to COVID-19, or beyond. My ambitions are more modest, and involve the identification, juxtaposition, and analysis of these shapes to offer a first analysis of their significance in this context. Second, I make no normative claim, either, about the desirability of these attempts at constructing temporality within this 'crisis', although each shape has its own history, advocates and critics (see Hom 2018). Contrasting them to one another is appropriate, I argue, for the empirical, analytical and critical contributions identified above, although future work – as I conclude – could profitably extend this analysis in this case study and, indeed, beyond.

A framework approach

The remainder of the article contains my analysis of constructions of temporality within British executive discourse on Coronavirus through to 23 June 2020. The timeframe is bounded by the pandemic's emergence within government discourse at the start, and – at the end – by the

termination of the daily press briefings that became central to the government's communication of this crisis. As demonstrated below, this provides insight into a particularly eventful period within the United Kingdom's encounter with the virus, including the first cases and deaths from COVID-19, as well as dramatic variations in hospitalisation and fatality rates. It also, importantly, incorporates major changes in the UK's efforts to arrest the virus' progress, including the institution and ending of a national 'lockdown'.

The corpus for my analysis was collected directly from the official website of the Prime Minister's office, hosted at www.gov.uk. It incorporates a diverse range of texts including authored newspaper articles, speeches, press releases, parliamentary statements, news items, public letters, and announcements. Every text hosted on the website within the project's temporal parameters was read for its relevance to the research; and every text referring to the pandemic or its response was included in the corpus for analysis. This generated 121 different sources with an aggregated length of over 77,200 words. Beyond the Prime Minister's spoken and written words, the dataset contains contributions from prominent administration figures including the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove; Business Secretary Alok Sharma; Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab (who represented the Prime Minister during Johnson's hospitalisation with the virus); Environment Secretary George Eustice; and the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Secretary Oliver Dowden.

Upon collection of the data, the corpus was subjected to a discursive analysis via the 'framework method' (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002). The method – which has been employed by qualitative researchers on topics from food insecurity (Law et al 2011) to counterterrorism policy (Jarvis and Lister 2015) – offers a systematic process of sifting, charting, and sorting research material for the purposes of summarising and classifying large volumes of data in its own terms (Jones, 2000: 560). This involved a detailed immersive reading of the corpus through Gale *et al's* (2013: 4-5) four stages: familiarisation with the documents; coding via the paraphrasing of short sections of text; developing an analytical framework from the coded material; and, finally, applying this framework to

the corpus. My analytical framework was therefore generated inductively from the research material, and organised around five index categories (see Figure 1): (i) The virus; (ii) The UK governmental response; (iii) The scientific/medical response; (iv) The public; and, (v) Temporality (tropes, metaphors, dates, and memory). All texts were then read 'through' this framework to allow for a distribution and coding of the data under each of these themes and their sub-categories. Although my research design cannot sustain any claim to the representativeness or replicability of my findings, the framework method is, as Gale et al (2013: 1) argue, a useful one for generating a 'set of codes organised into categories [creating] ... a new structure for the data ... that is helpful to summarize/reduce the data in a way that can support answering the research questions'.

Index category	Sub-categories	Example
1. The virus	1.1 Naming 1.2 Historical location/significance 1.3 Development 1.4 Measurement	1.2: Unprecedented: 'the most vicious threat this country has faced in my lifetime'
2. UK Government response	2.1 Nature of 2.2 Progress being made 2.3 Progress to be made (future knowns) 2.4 Future successes 2.5 Future challenges	2.1: Determination/resolve: 'we are doing everything we can to combat this outbreak'.
3. Scientific/medical response	3.1 Credibility 3.2 Successes 3.3 Challenges	3.1: Exceptionality of: 'The Government is doing everything possible, based on the advice of world-leading scientific experts, to prepare for all eventualities'.
4. Public	4.1 Demands upon 4.2 Hardships faced by 4.3 Coming together of 4.4 Gratitude for 4.5 Experiences of normality 4.6 Differences within	4.3: National unity: 'Last night, millions of people paid a fantastic tribute to the heroes and heroines of the NHS when they stepped outside their front doors and clapped our carers'.
5. Temporality (tropes, metaphors, dates, memory)	5.1 Temporal metaphors 5.2 Significant dates 5.3 Memory	5.3: Victimhood: 'For the doctors and nurses who have died of coronavirus whilst caring for others, we will never forget their sacrifice, we will never forget their devotion to helping others'.

Figure 1: British government discourse on COVID-19: An analytical framework

Constructing the COVID-19 pandemic

The following discussion focuses on two key aspects of executive political discourse relating to the temporalities of the COVID-19 pandemic (see also Jarvis 2021). I begin by exploring the temporal situation of the virus, distinguishing between its location as crisis of unprecedented reach, on the one hand. And, on the other, efforts to connect COVID-19 to meaningful historical precedents and parallels. Where the former relies upon a construction of radical temporal discontinuity, the latter – I argue – invokes a different conception of time as a cyclical, recurrent, dynamic. In the second section, I then explore constructions of the virus’ future, distinguishing confident claims to its eventual defeat from pessimistic accounts of its likely or inevitable worsening. These very different – albeit similarly linear – temporal imaginaries could co-exist in this evolving discourse, I argue, by virtue of the emphasis on contingency therein. In charting these heterogenous temporal claims, I pull attention throughout to the work they do for this discourse, not least in helping to constitute the government as a diligent, authoritative actor; to imbue the public with agency, and therefore, responsibility in ending the virus; and, in inscribing coherence into the UK’s response.

Situating COVID-19

The UK government’s attention began publicly to focus on COVID-19 after its initial outbreak in Wuhan, China in early 2020. Although initial references downplayed the virus’ threat, the language of ‘crisis’ became increasingly prominent in executive discourse as COVID-19 spread internationally. One official press release, for instance, pointed to ‘the need for international coordination as the crisis continues’ (Number 10, 2020c), while a 17 March statement from the Prime Minister saw him argue: ‘to beat this crisis we will need a combination of better science, technology, medicine, data, government operations, economic support, learning from other countries and social support’ (Johnson, 2020b). Two days later, the Prime Minister returned to this framing – ‘This crisis is so difficult because the enemy is invisible’ (Johnson, 2020d) – as, subsequently, did his Foreign Secretary, Dominic

Raab (2020b), in discussion of Johnson's own hospitalisation: 'he's a fighter and he'll be back at the helm leading us through this crisis in short order'. Related depictions of the virus as 'a moment of national emergency' (Johnson, 2020i); a 'tragedy that has touched every one of us' (Johnson, 2020o); and an 'extraordinary pandemic' (Johnson, 2020r), 'that has inflicted permanent scars' (Johnson 2020q), both contributed to and strengthened this emerging interpretation.

Depictions of COVID-19 such as these served to produce, rather than describe, the pandemic as a national (and, on occasion, global) crisis (see Hay 1996; Croft 2006: 5) through its removal from the mundanities of normal political existence. Relatively moderate discussions of the pandemic as a 'difficult time' (Johnson, 2020c) or a 'worrying time' (Raab 2020a) were increasingly replaced by far more dramatic references to the period as 'the worst of times' (Johnson, 2020m). This crisis narrative, as Colin Hay (1999: 318) argues elsewhere, rendered the pandemic's significance almost beyond question: 'Crisis has an immense lay, media and academic currency. It is rhetorically rich, attention-grasping and broadly pejorative'. It was also, as we shall see, vital for establishing the rhetorical terrain for the government's subsequent efforts to address the pandemic (Hay 1999: 336-7); imbuing those efforts with an exceptionalism tied to this growing sense of urgency.

This crisis narrative was also key to the emergence of what became an explicitly discontinuous situating of the pandemic as a moment of generational significance that exceeded the experience of most (or all) witnesses.ⁱⁱⁱ The Prime Minister, on 10 May, described COVID-19 as 'the most vicious threat this country has faced in my lifetime' (Johnson, 2020l); returning to his earlier description of the pandemic as 'a challenge we have never seen in our lifetimes' (Johnson 2020k). Dominic Raab (2020a), expanded its spatial parameters arguing, 'Coronavirus hasn't just challenged us at home, it is the greatest global challenge in a generation'. As, too, did Business Secretary, Alok Sharma (2020b): 'The coronavirus pandemic is the biggest threat our country has faced in decades, and we are not alone'. Starker still, within this construction, were references to the pandemic as a truly singular historical moment. Sharma (2020a), for instance, noted: 'coronavirus represents an unprecedented

challenge', echoing, here, the Prime Minister's discussion of: 'this unprecedented challenge' (Johnson, 2020c).

These constructions of exceptionality situate and therefore constitute the pandemic as a moment of temporal rupture. By cementing the virus' significance through a constructed historical uniqueness, they also helped address mounting criticism of the government's handling of the pandemic, for instance:

We have made fast progress on testing – but there is so much more to do now ... *When this began, we hadn't seen this disease before, and we didn't fully understand its effects.* With every day we are getting more and more data (Johnson, 2020l, my emphasis).

More frequent, though, was this construction's employment to highlight, explain and praise the government's response to the virus as equally – and therefore appropriately – unprecedented. This claim saturated official discourse from early discussions of social distancing – 'That is why we announced the steps yesterday that we did – advising against all unnecessary contact – steps that are unprecedented since World War 2' (Johnson, 2020b) – through to later discussion of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's 'support package' for workers: 'we are going to help workers of all kinds to get through this crisis, Supporting you directly in a way that Government has never been done before' (Johnson, 2020d). The Business Secretary spoke similarly to 'an unprecedented package of support' (Sharma, 2020e), while the closure of public spaces was described as a series of 'restrictions never seen before either in peace or war' (Johnson, 2020f). Considerable emphasis was, predictably, placed upon the government's 'unprecedented action to increase NHS capacity by dramatically expanding the number of beds, key staff and life-saving equipment on the front-line' (Sharma, 2020b). And, this temporal construction was employed, too, to communicate the UK's exit from – and earlier entry into – lockdown, with the gradual easing of restrictions in the Spring of 2020. As the Prime Minister argued in a *Mail on Sunday* article: 'We are trying to do something that has never had to be done before -

moving the country out of a full lockdown, in a way which is safe and does not risk sacrificing all of your hard work' (Johnson, 2020m).

This production of COVID-19 as a moment of temporal discontinuity was completed, finally, with the imagination of the post-pandemic climate as a 'new normal' profoundly altering everyday life. This construction achieved prominence following Dominic Raab's (2020f) 5 May daily press conference:

We will need to adjust to a new normal where we as a society adapt to safe new ways to work, to travel, to interact and to go about our daily lives. We've never experienced anything like this first stage of COVID-19, in terms of the scale of the lives lost but also the lockdown that it has required.

The phrase was subsequently picked up by the Business Secretary, amongst others, in discussing the post-lockdown easing of restrictions on public life:

In the new normal, we have all got used to shopping with social distancing. Now is the right time to apply these principles more widely, to more shops, as we continue our cautious re-opening of the economy (Sharma, 2020e).

In short, then, the opening months of 2020 witnessed the emergence of a powerful and pervasive construction of COVID-19 as a relatively – or entirely – unprecedented crisis confronting the United Kingdom and – at times – others. Through this framing, the virus was coherently positioned as a bringer of temporal rupture; a disturbance of a hitherto-stable normality, engendering suffering and trauma to distant and direct witnesses (see Kyriakidou 2009). Such a framing became concretised with references to the emergence of a qualitatively new normalcy demanding acclimatisation to unprecedented restrictions. The 'old normal' preceding the rupture of COVID-19, however, was rarely elaborated, sitting simply as an imaginary temporal other to the new time into which 'we' had been thrown. It is this implicit, undefined, construction that solidifies this temporality as a shared time,

providing coherence and meaning to the (typically national) ‘we’ encountering this crisis.^{iv} COVID-19, then, becomes a common, unifying experience of collective tragedy and, indeed, collective emergence into a fundamentally distinct historical moment. Differences – experiential, demographic, and beyond – are smoothed over in, and through, this scripting of a profound, shared, discontinuous temporality.

This constructed temporality, as indicated above, performed important work for explaining and justifying the UK’s response to this crisis. While insufficient to structure the specific contents of the response, this ‘urgency of emergency’ (Salter 2011, p.116) was employed to legitimise a range of economic, social and political initiatives introduced by Johnson’s administration. As the Prime Minister argued back on 17 March: ‘the government machine must and will respond with a profound sense of urgency. Thousands of brilliant officials are already working round the clock but we must do more and faster’ (Johnson, 2020b).^v This construction, here, imbues the UK’s response with a logic of appropriateness; shaping the strategy’s conceivability through a claim to unprecedented threat meeting unprecedented response (see Doty 1993; Holland 2013). This, in turn, helped illuminate attractive policy responses such as economic assistance for workers, while, simultaneously, explaining, justifying and ‘selling’ less popular decisions such as the continuation of lockdown restrictions. Beyond this, it facilitated the coherence of different aspects of the government’s response into one overarching, consistent strategy of constituent – because equally unprecedented – parts. As the Prime Minister summarised in an article written for Mother’s Day:

That is why this country has taken the steps that it has, in imposing restrictions never seen before either in peace or war. We have closed the schools, the pubs, the bars, the restaurants, the gyms, and we are asking people to stay and work at home if they possibly can. In order to help businesses and workers through the crisis, we have come up with unprecedented packages of support. All of this is putting our country, and our society, under enormous strain. But already this crisis is also bringing out the best in us all (Johnson 2020f).

This constructed exceptionality was – importantly – not an inevitable historical positioning of the virus. In the early stages of this crisis, the Prime Minister himself had downplayed its exceptionality as a threat to public health, joking about shaking hands with coronavirus sufferers (Mason 2020), and arguing that, ‘for the overwhelming majority of people who contract the virus, this will be a mild disease from which they will speedily and fully recover as we’ve already seen’ (Johnson, 2020a). The proliferation of comparisons to prior pandemics (e.g. Walsh 2020), likewise, demonstrated the plausibility of alternative temporal imaginaries that may have been called upon to make sense of COVID-19. Although such framings rapidly exited official discourse as case and fatality rates continued to grow, invocations of historical comparisons and precedents continued to problematise this prominent discontinuous framing. Past medical successes that could be attributed to the work of British researchers, for instance, injected a patriotic optimism to the contemporary crisis:

Just as Edward Jenner developed the smallpox vaccine in the eighteenth century, we need to apply the best of British scientific endeavour to the search for the coronavirus vaccine. To that end I can announce today, that the government has set up a Vaccines Taskforce to co-ordinate the efforts of government, academia and industry towards a single goal: To accelerate the development of a coronavirus vaccine (Sharma, 2020c).

On other occasions, the construction of historical precedents benefited from a more internationalist emphasis:

Our predecessors overcame terrible evils and they were at their best in moments of adversity. As we face *our own time of adversity*, I believe that we can come through this crisis and achieve a strong, green and fair recovery, if we show the same generosity and breadth of spirit that should always animate the United Nations (Number 10, 2020f, my emphasis)

These references to significant historical precedents potentially problematise COVID-19’s uniqueness. The above construction of temporal discontinuity, here, is now replaced by a rather different account of temporal cyclicity centred on historical repetition across chronologically distinct periods (see Edkins

2003; Jarvis 2009). COVID-19, in this writing, lacks the exceptionality of the discontinuous depictions above. Although not identical to, it may meaningfully be compared with, ‘terrible evils’ such as smallpox suffered by ‘our’ ancestors. In the process, this depiction of now-defeated adversities injects hope into the current struggle against the virus via a further conception of *linear* temporality – different to each of those considered thus far – in which a continuity of identity (British, in the first example; human, in the second) directly links our current selves to our forebears. ‘Our’ (British, or human) confrontation with COVID-19 today, here, sees a recurrence of ‘our’ (British, or human) prior health insecurities. As the Prime Minister put it in his closing remarks to the Global Vaccine Summit on 4 June 2020.

Our ancestors had to live with the unavoidable reality that killer pathogens could at any time strike down their children, imposing an incalculable burden of sorrow. Yet, today, thanks to the ingenuity of Edward Jenner, a British doctor from Gloucestershire who pioneered the world’s first vaccine, the simple act of inoculating our children can save lives many times over. Vaccines work. People who are vaccinated protect themselves and the rest of the population by lowering the spread and risk of infection ... and so it is that our collective efforts at this Summit will now save up to 8 million lives (Johnson, 2020p).

COVID-19’s futures

In the remainder of this section I expand on the above references to the likely futures of COVID-19. In so doing, I highlight two ambiguities in temporal projections of the virus’ development. First, is an epistemological one, in which COVID-19’s evolution is produced both as known and predictable, *and* as unknown and indeterminate. Second, is a directional one in which the virus’ future is seen in progressive *and* declinist ways: as becoming, or likely to become, both more and less severe. I argue that this discourse was capable of sustaining these quite different temporal imaginaries because of the prominent governmental emphasis on contingency and public responsibility.

Early official discourse within the UK demonstrated considerable confidence on the virus' future trajectory. A 2 March press release following a COBR committee emergency meeting, for instance, noted, 'there now seems little doubt that it will present a significant challenge for our country' (Number 10, 2020a). As the Prime Minister subsequently argued, COVID-19 'is so dangerous and so infectious that without drastic measures to check its progress it would overwhelm any health system in the world' (Johnson, 2020b). This epistemological assurance was linked, at times, to our capacity for future lesson-learning: 'As time goes on we will learn more and more about the disease and the effects of our actions' (Johnson, 2020b). At others, it was expressed through predictions of genuine progress within a relatively short time-frame:

I do think, looking at it all, that we can turn the tide within the next 12 weeks. And I am absolutely confident that we can send coronavirus packing in this country but only if we take the steps, we all take the steps we have outlined (Johnson, 2020d).

Johnson's prediction here exemplifies a powerful claim to the virus' future diminishment that was widespread throughout the first months of 2020. With the introduction of restrictions on public activity, for instance, the Prime Minister had argued 'what we are asking everyone to do is so crucial for saving literally thousands of lives by defeating this virus' (Johnson, 2020d). Later, as the UK entered its 'lockdown' he returned to this assertion, noting: 'with your help we will slow the spread of the disease' (Johnson, 2020h). For much of this period, indeed, executive predictions went further still, forecasting not only progress against, but the ultimate 'defeat' of, the virus. As Johnson (2020b, my emphasis) argued on 17 March, 'this enemy can be deadly, but it is also beatable – and we know how to beat it and we know that if as a country we follow the scientific advice that is now being given we *know that we will beat it*'. In the Business Secretary's description of 1 April: 'Times are tough, and we have harder times ahead of us. But I know that together, we will pull through' (Sharma, 2020b). For the Prime Minister, more succinctly, 'always remember – we will get through this, and we will beat it together' (Johnson, 2020g).

The inevitability of future ‘victory’ within this war metaphor was explained in diverse ways as the crisis continued. In some instances, a combination of political and scientific resolve were highlighted as key: ‘by a mixture of determined, collective action and scientific progress, I have absolutely no doubt that we will turn the tide of this disease and beat it together’ (Johnson, 2020e). In others, a national ‘spirit’ was afforded explanatory power: ‘It is with that great British spirit that we will beat coronavirus and we will beat it together’ (Johnson, 2020i). As the Foreign Secretary argued: ‘Now is not the moment to give the coronavirus a second chance. Let’s stick together, let’s see this through. And let’s defeat the coronavirus for good’ (Raab, 2020e).

Importantly, this construction of temporal progress was accompanied by a rather different – but similarly linear – conception of temporal decline centred on continuing, even increasing, risk from the virus. In the earliest days of the pandemic’s emergence, this became manifest through predictions of increasing cases and casualties: ‘it is highly likely coronavirus will spread more widely in the coming days and weeks’ (Number 10, 2020b) and, ‘it is highly likely that we will see a growing number of UK cases’ (Johnson, 2020a). By the time of the Prime Minister’s letter of 28 March, however, future deterioration had become a certainty: ‘It’s important for me to level with you – we know things will get worse before they get better.’ (Johnson; 2020i). As his Foreign Secretary subsequently argued: ‘the deaths are still rising, and we haven’t yet reached the peak of the virus.’ (Raab, 2020c).

This construction of future harm did not leave the discourse in the period under analysis here, even with growing executive confidence in its strategic response. Indeed, the predictability of increased casualties was increasingly invoked to justify the UK’s approach, with public failure to adhere to government guidelines frequently linked to the inevitability of future risk, often depicted as a second ‘wave’, ‘peak’ or ‘spike’ repeating or even exceeding the pandemic’s initial tragedy. Dominic Raab (2020c), in his 9 April statement discussed above, argued:

After all the efforts that everyone's made, after all the sacrifices so many people have made, let's not ruin it now. ... We mustn't give the coronavirus a second chance to kill more people and hurt our country ... we'll only defeat this virus for good if we all stay the course.

As he continued the following week:

we're now at both a delicate and dangerous stage of this pandemic. If we rush to relax the measures in place, we would risk wasting all the sacrifices and all the progress we have made. And that would risk a quick return to another lockdown. With all the threat to life a second peak of the virus would bring, and all the economic damage a second lockdown would carry (Raab, 2020e).

As attention turned to the exiting of lockdown, the public were increasingly cautioned about the risk of a second peak – 'what we are asking the British public [is] ... designed to avoid the very real risk of a second peak that would overwhelm the NHS' (Raab, 2020g) – and prepared for the inevitability of more localised outbreaks: 'I have to warn you, *there will be* further local outbreaks. So we will monitor carefully, we will put on the brakes as required, and where necessary, we will re-impose measures.' (Johnson, 2020n), my emphasis).

These two constructions of COVID-19's likely development offer very different projections of the future. In the former, we find an epistemological confidence about the virus' eventual diminishment, highlighting the significance, and interaction of, political, public and scientific efforts toward this. The latter, in contrast, posits a future of increasing harm to public and economic wellbeing within the United Kingdom. Each of these constructions relies upon a broadly linear construction of temporality invoking, '(1) a descriptive account of some sequence, and (2) a principle of evaluation by which this [sequence] is to be assessed as involving changes for better or worse' (Graham 1997: 51). In the first, a connection is forged between the virus, knowledge thereof, the government's response, public acceptance of that response, and future defeat of the virus; all evaluated by the virus' deceleration and declining harm. In the second, in contrast, a narrative of temporal decline evaluated

by future human and economic hardship is constructed, primarily, from fears around the disregarding, or premature relaxation, of the government's counter-measures.

British executive discourse was capable of sustaining these very different temporal projections because of an emphasis upon future indeterminacy that grew steadily throughout the pandemic. Although largely absent from those early, bold predictions of eventual 'victory' with which the section began, the government increasingly stressed the possibility of multiple futures contingent upon public engagement with the UK's strategy. This emphasis on contingency involved positioning the present or near future as a crossroads at which diametrically opposed outcomes were both foreseeable and possible. In the words of one 'Government Spokesperson': '*We are at a crucial moment* in preventing further transmission of coronavirus, and so it is vital that we continue following the government's guidance to stay at home, protect the NHS, and save lives' (Number 10, 2020d, my emphasis). For the Foreign Secretary, similarly:

If we let up now the virus will only take full advantage. It will spread faster and it will kill more.

If we refuse to give into it, if we keep up this incredible team effort, we will beat this virus, and we will come through this national test. Our plan is working. Please stick with it, and we'll get through this crisis together (Raab, 2020d).

This emphasis on the future's contingency marks the present with profound significance through attributing agency to the British public – such that public actions will determine the virus' progress – and investing the government with responsibility (understood as both diligence and accountability). It adds normative weight to political exhortations for public obedience – 'It is only by working together that we will prevent future waves of infection and end this pandemic as quickly as possible' (Number 10, 2020e) – while further contributing to the forging of a common national identity through shared suffering and resolve in which publics and elites contribute, collectively, to a shared task: 'if *everyone* stays alert and follows the rules, *we* can control coronavirus by keeping the R down and reducing the number of infections. This is how *we* can continue to save lives as we begin *as a nation* to recover

from coronavirus.’ (Sharma, 2020d, my emphasis). As the Prime Minister argued at the very end of the period under analysis here:

Of course, the fight is far from over. This is a nasty virus still that wants to take advantage of our carelessness. I’m afraid there will be local outbreaks. And I must tell you that if the virus were to begin to run out of control, I will not hesitate to put on the handbrake on and reverse some of these changes, at a local or indeed national level as required. But we can avoid that if we all continue to stay alert and do our bit to control the virus. The British public have proved again and again, not that it was ever in doubt it, that they can be trusted to do the right thing and to do it with common sense. There is no doubt we are beating back this virus and, with your continued cooperation and good judgment we will beat it once and for all (Johnson 2020r).

In sum, government discussion of COVID-19’s development was marked by considerable variation in the imagination of the virus’ futures, from confident predictions of eventual ‘victory’ through to fears of potential or anticipated suffering. The emphasis on contingency within this discourse was vital to the maintenance of these different constructions, as we have seen, because it served to connect distinct imagined futures to ‘our’ present and past actions through a repeated claim to public agency. This construction helped to pre-empt criticism of government policy by responsabilising the public as stakeholders in this metaphorical confrontation (see Peeters 2019), while also facilitating the movement between quite heterogeneous conceptions of temporality in which better, worse, known, and unknown futures could simultaneously be posited.

Conclusion

In this article I have offered a first theorisation of the importance of temporal claims within the UK government’s construction of the COVID-19 coronavirus. Through an original discursive analysis of

over 120 official texts I developed three arguments. First, specific framings of temporality saturated executive discourse in this context, playing a vital role in situating the virus historically, and in charting its likely development. Second, these references to temporality were politically productive throughout the period under investigation, especially in helping to communicate, justify, and defend the government's evolving response to COVID-19. And, third, heterogeneities in the imagination of the virus' pasts and futures illustrate the precarious and constructed nature of these claims, while opening space for critical reflection thereof.

By making these arguments, the article offers three contributions to knowledge. First, *empirically*, it provides the first detailed analysis of temporality as a key constitutive aspect of governmental discourse on this crisis. As we have seen, temporal constructions were vital to the production and location of this virus, including in relation to earlier threats such as smallpox and, indeed, the experiences and expectations of those subject to COVID-19. Second, *analytically*, the article draws attention to the constitutive importance of temporal claims in the Johnson government's response to this crisis, including the construction of government actions, and national identity. In so doing, it also facilitates insight into the government's ideology and statecraft.^{vi} Fundamentally temporal constructions of shared public experiences and collective responsibilities, and of a leadership prepared to take unprecedented action, clearly contributed to a 'Borisonian populism' apparent throughout this crisis (see Flinders 2020). Temporal references to distinctively British characteristics, and the celebration of British histories and successes from Edward Jenner to World War 2, highlight the related but distinct importance of nationalist rhetoric to this government. More pointedly, the heterogeneities discussed above might also be taken as evidence of a vacillating and indecisive political leadership, of which the Prime Minister finds himself often accused. Although such reflections push us beyond this article's scope, they highlight further the value of sustained engagement with constructions of temporality in political rhetoric. Finally, *critically*, the juxtaposition of distinct temporal claims against one another in the above discussion also, I have shown, facilitates

problematization of the inevitability of the UK's response by opening this discourse to an internal critique.

As a first sustained investigation into the temporal dimensions of coronavirus discourse, there is considerable scope for future research to build on this analysis. First, as indicated above, although this article addresses the connection between temporal framings of the virus and government policy, more might still be done to evaluate the role of temporal constructions within the latter – from descriptions of current/future progress and setbacks, to the celebration of milestones, and the updating of daily death tolls. Second, much might also be done on the wider 'social times' inherent to the governance and experience of this crisis, from a weekly 'clap for our carers' event, to new working patterns and their implications. Third, there is huge importance to understanding the mnemonic work of political, media, and vernacular 'memory projects' that have begun the task of remembering victims of the virus across diverse forms (see Wagner-Pacifici 1996). And, finally, there is significant scope, too, for comparative work relating to constructed temporalities on COVID-19 beyond UK political discourse. By building on, and contributing to, recent work on the politics of temporality this article offers a first step towards such research.

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ⁱ My thanks to the editors and anonymous reviewers for their comments and support. Thanks also to Alan Finlayson, Michael Frazer, Tim Legrand, and Michael Lister for their insight on related outputs from this project which has informed this piece.

ⁱⁱ The term ‘crisis’ itself has a temporal etymology, referring to moments of rupture, thorough-going transformation, and decisive intervention (Hay 1999: 323).

ⁱⁱⁱ Similarities here might be identified with Karl Mannheim’s (1970) conception of generations as emerging through the social bonds established through shared encounter with profound historical problems.

^{iv} As Michael Billig (1995: 70) suggests, ‘There is a case for saying that nationalism is, above all, an ideology of the first person plural. The crucial question relating to national identity is how the national ‘we’ is constructed and what is meant by such construction’.

^v My focus here is on the temporal construction of the COVID-19 virus itself. Future work will explore the importance of constructions of temporality for the government’s strategic response to this virus, which included recurrent claims to be ‘working around the clock’; repeated turn to ‘milestones’ and quantitative indicators of ‘progress’; and temporal comparisons between cities and states, such as the UK being ‘two or three weeks behind Italy’.

^{vi} My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for pushing me here.