



Pandemic times. A conversation with Lisa Baraitser about the temporal politics of COVID-19

Laura Kemmer, Annika Kühn and Vanessa Weber

Introduction

Lisa Baraitser is Professor of Psychosocial Theory at Birkbeck, University of London. In her research, she combines psychoanalytic and social theories to address the temporal, ethical and affective dimensions of care. In this interview, Prof. Baraitser helps us think through the temporal politics of COVID-19 and the ways in which pandemic conditions transform the affective dimensions of care work in Europe and US-America.

Annika Kühn (AK): For this issue of *ephemera*, we have conceptualized standby as a more-than-human temporality, relating it to the organization of contemporary lifeworlds, from labor and migration, through infrastructures, to ecologies. Here, standby becomes an act of social ordering, synchronizing and regulating a sort of modern ‘standing reserve’ (Heidegger, 1977), where people, things, biological agents, and technical devices are held together in a state of constant readiness. Arguably, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent proliferation of lockdown scenarios, large parts of these socio-material and ecological formations are experiencing a new quality of successive ‘standbys’, waiting for their world to move on. This turns our attention to the sociopolitical effects of standby and makes us wonder how we can also think of standby as a device that changes power relations in

subtle yet radical ways. Lisa, in our search for answers to this question, we have found strikingly original reflections in your previous work on the temporalities of suspension and the manifold expressions of ‘stuckness’ in contemporary cultures. Your monograph *Enduring time* (Baraitser, 2017) unfolds an array of durational practices and affective strategies of survival in late liberalism, analysed from a psychosocial perspective. Re-adjusting these reflections to the new reality, in a recent article with Laura Salisbury (Baraitser and Salisbury, 2020), you provide a lead for us to reformulate the above-question, urging us to think about how to inhabit pandemic times.

Lisa Baraitser (LB): Firstly, thank you for the invitation to be in dialogue with the three of you, and for your conceptual framing of the time of the ‘now’ in relation to the notion of standby. Although I have been working on temporal experiences of waiting, delay, and other forms of stuck or sluggish time, I had not connected it with the material and technological framing that you offer with the notion of standby, nor to the political framing that Donald Trump’s incendiary comments have brought to the fore, that were designed to call on a ‘standing reserve’ of a much more threatening kind. Standby, as you have conceptualised it, becomes a particular form of waiting that occurs in relation to impeded movement which also, then, impedes time’s flow. It has both enabling and threatening potentials.

Laura Kemmer (LK): Yes, absolutely, and this also points us to something we encountered when rethinking standby scenarios in relation to pandemic times. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, we have been told repeatedly that in order to keep the system running we need to temporarily suspend all kinds of personal and institutional bonds – a sort of loosening relations in order to guarantee the re-activation of all kinds of socio-material infrastructures at a later time (Kühn, forthcoming). To what extent do you think this adds a new quality to the ways we have been trained and training ourselves in acts of ‘purported indifference’ (Kemmer/Simone, 2021), not in the sense of giving up, but rather as way of standing by the failed promises of the present?

LB: This is such an interesting and important question, it references the need to maintain ourselves in the face of repeated abandonment by institutions, or attacks on institutions that are there to maintain life’s flourishing.

It suggests that there is a kind of affective work that supports this maintenance, and it takes the form of ‘purported indifference’ or a kind of detachment in the name of survival. It reminds me of something Julia Kristeva wrote about in her work on ‘maternal passion’ in which she argues that the ‘passion’ a mother has for ‘a child’ (which I read to mean anyone whom one comes to name and claim as a child, and not a biological bond, or even an intergenerational one), entails a double movement of passion and detachment, passion as depassioning, a kind of loosening, as you put it, of attachment so that the ‘child’ can separate. Here purported indifference has a protective function towards the ‘child’ that might be distinct from the kind of despair that sets in under conditions of repeated ‘lockdown’, not just in relation to COVID-19.

AK: Against this background, what does it mean if ‘lockdown’ becomes a repetitive mode? How does the constant alternation between ‘radical suspension’ and ‘back to the new normal’ affect the ways we inhabit pandemic times?

LB: One thing that is striking about what happened when many parts of the world shutdown due to COVID-19 was that this happened in an historical period that one could already describe as having entered into ‘standby’ for many; in previous work I had been tracking pockets of ‘stuck time’ that co-exist within otherwise speeded up, accelerated time that include the stilled yet frenetic time of precarious labour; the deep time violence of environmental damage; the cruel crushing of hopefulness and futurity for whole populations held in suspension due to austerity measures; and changing patterns of debt, to name a few. My interest has been to link these forms of stuck time to the time of care, which also has the structure of suspension. Care, after all, involves waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, persisting, and what Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) names as ‘hovering and adjusting’.

If we think of the repetitions of ‘lockdown’ as the suspension of all sorts of life projects, if we think of it in relation to the incarceration of Black life, the locking up of hope in conditions of economic collapse, and the foreclosure of the future brought about by indifference to the climate crisis, then standby may well be a way to ‘stay with’ as a form of care for the future.

Vanessa Weber (VW): In your work you speak about caring as a capacity to ‘stand by’ that involves both repetition but also the ability to permanently begin again. Has caring as a common mode of existence received more awareness in pandemic times?

LB: Much of what I’ve been trying to think about in my own work, and with the team of researchers working with myself and Laura Salisbury on the *Waiting Times* project (<http://waitingtimes.exeter.ac.uk/>), is how to conceptualise the time of care in a broader context in which time itself may be on ‘standby’, and which the COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp relief. Practices of care are often tied to the pace and rhythms of those we care for, whether human, or non-human, or even ideas that have fallen into disrepute and practices that seem obsolete in the contemporary moment. Because we cannot control this pace, and because care and the need for care is unevenly distributed, care seems to entail staying in time that can feel disruptive to already established rhythms, so that time stagnates, becomes repetitive yet motionless. Often ‘care time’ is not really experienced as moving, developing, flowing or unfolding. It can be emotionally full, but more often it is time that must be endured, suffered even, rather than embraced. Many people who found themselves unable to leave home and go to work during the pandemic, but were trying to work from home alongside permanently being on ‘standby’ for their children, as well as trying to home school them, might relate to this. And of course, it is women who largely found themselves disrupted in this way, despite being at home with male partners, because of the ways that women are still socialized into being the primary carers of young children, and hence being the ones whose time can be constantly interrupted. It seems to me that you are proposing that ‘standby’ encapsulates a form of materialized waiting, one that pushes us to think further about who or what is put on standby, for how long, by whom, and for what purposes, and therefore how power enters the waiting relation. I’m grateful for this really fruitful concept.

VW: Yes, and it is this way that many of the COVID-19 related measurements made us revisit what might be the sociopolitical implications of standby. Notions such as ‘system relevant’ and ‘standby labor’ accompany the (partial) shutdown of caring institutions on the one hand, while on the other hand, there have been celebrations of lockdown situations as an opportunity to

‘reset’ and rethink our ways of living in this world. These make us wonder about privileges, beneficiaries and the reshuffling of power relations.

LB: I think that one of the things that COVID-19 has revealed is both the temporality of the current moment as one of standby, and the paradoxical need to *endure* standby, even to open it up, in order to take care of time, to produce the care-ful attention that is required to really know about the injustices of the present in order that there be a future at all. These injustices include the profound inequalities that have become so extreme over the last 10 years of austerity, and it is really this that has come to the fore during the pandemic. I think this endurance – staying in stuck time long enough to really know about injustice – requires the management of very anxious states of mind. In the piece I wrote with Laura Salisbury (Baraitser and Salisbury, 2020), we tried to disrupt the UK government’s use of the terms ‘containment, delay and mitigation’ as descriptive of their initial response to the pandemic. For us, all three terms have particular meanings in psychoanalysis. Containment has to do with developing the capacity to think, ‘thinking’ being a kind of emotional process that deals with ‘thoughts’ which are more object like mental entities that can be felt to attack our minds in cruel and destructive ways. Thinking can occur when anxieties generated by what our thoughts can do to ourselves and others can be contained, usually by another, and eventually by our own minds. Containment, delay and mitigation thought in a psychosocial way bind together care and waiting, not waiting for something specific to happen, but a ‘waiting with’ as a way to manage the anxious bombardment of thoughts, whose qualities can become knowable, in all their difficulty and violence. It is becoming clear that this particular pandemic will have a much longer timeline than first expected, possibly with repeated lockdown scenarios, and that we are all more vulnerable to the spread of future novel viruses in a globally networked world. This makes containment understood as ‘waiting with’, even more important, if we are to know about, care about, and address the inequalities that were always there but the pandemic has forced into awareness.

LK: From our view, your article with Laura Salisbury provides us with one of the few ‘psychosocial’ takes on these issues: Could you explain how this perspective helps us specifying current political scenarios?

LB: A psychosocial perspective has something to do with a reluctance to reduce and resolve the tension between, on the one hand a social, political, and historical analysis of the current state of things, and on the other, the disruptions to this analysis that are produced when we bring processes that structure psychic life, interior life, affective life into the picture. It is less additive – a social plus a psychological analysis – and more a process of using one perspective to displace or dislodge the other, throw it off the subject, as it were. A psychosocial perspective would refuse to give up on the difficult work of acknowledging attachments, identifications, longings, anxieties, and destructiveness as a way to understand the persistence of injustice, inequality and abuses of power. In addition, because psychoanalysis, which is one of the key theoretical resources for psychosocial thinking, has a very particular account of temporality, questions of memory, futurity, repetition, chronic waiting, and the ‘now’ open up in different ways. If we are to try to understand the catastrophic failures of State care, for instance, in the UK – the failure of the track and trace system despite billions of pounds being paid to private companies to provide it, the collapse of social care for the elderly due to chronic underfunding over decades, the fact that 1 in 3 children in the UK live in poverty and 2.5 million children now live in food insecure households – then a social analysis is not enough, it doesn’t explain fully why this situation has been allowed to develop and what sustains it. Instead we need to try to understand why we cannot hold this situation in mind enough to do something about it. It’s not that individuals don’t care, which I think they do. But care entails bearing to know about the violence and destructiveness we are also capable of, whether as individuals or at the level of institutions and the State, and a psychosocial perspective tries to elucidate this.

AK: You have described care as a way of ‘living with’ various affective states and ambivalences, including racialized, gendered and class-based differences. COVID-19 shows impressively how the shutdown of some areas of society accelerates inequality and amplifies social polarization in others, and vice versa: What does this reveal about the (gendered and racialized) division of public and private spaces?

LB: The question of what constitutes the space of ‘home’ has been highlighted in very dramatic and brutal ways – the fact that so many people don’t have shelter, let alone something that can feel as safe and reliable as ‘home’, and

that the 'home' for some women, queer and transfolk, children and of course older people in 'care homes' is a space of violence, danger and neglect. Here 'living with' or 'staying with' or 'staying alongside' should not be a matter of staying in situations of danger or violence, but reactivating the resources that 'remain' from long decades of work by feminists, queer and transactivists, anti-racist activists and many others who have been prepared to 'go on going on' about the chronic repetition of situations that may be repudiated culturally because they are seen as tired, uninspiring, uninteresting, or out-of-date. Sara Ahmed's (2010) figure of the 'feminist killjoy' would be one example of the figure who goes on going on about injustice, discrimination and abuse, despite the accusation that she 'kills' joy.

With Michael Flexer in the *Waiting Times* team, I have been trying to think about the relation between moment and movement, and why a moment in time (what you called the current moment) may retrospectively come to be understood as eventual – a time that has a certain quality, that is differentiated from unqualified time – through a political movement that has an elongated history, in relation to the elongated time of the traumas of slavery, colonialism and imperialism. Trauma, as we know, is only knowable through temporal delay. It comes back to us from an unrecorded and obliterated present as something that repeats from what comes to be the past. For trauma to be known about, acknowledged, and cared about, it has to move in the present, move us in the present. We could think of the temporal hiatus produced by COVID-19 as a time that has forced a quality of thinking about movement and moment into collective consciousness. Being forced to live in the suspended time of lockdown, to know that we are in a time that will become an historical event from the perspective of another historical time in the future, which some people have likened to the simultaneous monotony and terror of the temporalities of conflict or war, there is a chance that a certain kind of thinking can emerge that can know something about trauma, that can stay alongside this long enough to care about it.

LK: Speaking of 'movements', right now, there is an intense manifestation of all kinds of (conflictive) political claims and convictions – partly coming together in form of protest movements, partly through acts of solidarity; and organizing in both physical and virtual spaces. Could you think of the

interplay of such different formations, or of how ambivalent 'standby' moments interact with political movements?

LB: I think many analyses of the COVID-19 pandemic have now understood that the pandemic has unfolded alongside, and perhaps even prompted, another temporal event; the renewed urgency of the call for racial justice made by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement during the time of lockdown. These two events – the murder by US police of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade and Dion Johnson between February and May 2020, and the spreading of COVID-19 around the world leading to conditions of lockdown for millions of people – are coterminous, and they are related to one another in the sense that COVID-19 has disproportionately affected those already suffering the most from the effects of our current capitalist organization which itself is built on the excessive brutality of slavery, colonialism and empire. BLM has been making this call for a long time, and before this, the work on racial justice has been taking place, you could say, over the last 400 years. It has been productive, Lauren Williams (2020) argues, of black rage, which is born of chronic waiting. It has been a very very long wait.

I'm struck by the double meaning of standby – of both active inactivity, but also standing by, or taking up the position of a bystander, someone who witnesses something without intervening. I've mentioned Lauren Williams' work on 'black rage' as a response to chronic waiting, and rage is certainly one affective dimension of standby that refuses the position of bystander. I've argued elsewhere, however, that 'depression' is also a useful way to think about the affective dimension of waiting (Baraitser and Brook, 2020). It links up with your notion of detachment in the name of survival, a necessary withdrawal, perhaps, that I think can intervene in the logic of 'crisis' and its antithesis, 'anti-crisis' that tends to dominate models for understanding social change. Here depression becomes a mode of 'watchful waiting', or careful protest, a form of waiting that can stay open to, and aware of, the potentials for failures of care or of violence that hovers within any act of care.

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