

Will the Covid-19 pandemic change human history?

The New Year's optimism heralded by many at the onset of 2021 found itself wholly blighted by the reality of the ongoing pandemic; January witnessed the milestone of two million worldwide Covid-19 fatalities. Indubitably, the outbreak will inflict an enduring scar on the collective psyche, yet it is equally certain that eventually the most imminent dangers of the virus will pass. The historian then is faced with the consequences primarily of the emergency measures taken and the economic and political change they have induced. Human history, in its broadness and abstraction, will not be changed by the pandemic but rather will simply incorporate the fact and experiences as further history. To the future historian however, the current situation is likely to mould their perspective on early twenty-first century history, and to mark a chapter of historical narrative that is, for a wider populace, unpredictable when compared to the political trajectory immediately prior. The pandemic is not likely to substantially undermine current models of civilisation, but the extreme situations it incites are rather catalysts to existing courses as opposed to causes in themselves.

A broader point that first demands addressing is the more philosophical question of whether history can be changed. Although when considering events unique in spectacle such as the Wall Street Crash, the September 11th attacks, or indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic, it is necessary not to neglect a more acute understanding of present and past. In truth, the sense of the present moment is an anthropomorphic construction demarcating the perpetual frontier between past and future. The idea of historical change itself requires a static model of revisionism in which history is set upon a linear course that is externally affected; it is almost reminiscent of outdated concepts of theistic determinism. History cannot be changed as it exists simply as an objective and apathetic amalgamation of events and records. Indeed, in contemplating such a point in his pioneering series of lectures entitled 'What is History?', E.H. Carr describes history as "a corpus of ascertained fact" that is to the historian "like fish on a fishmonger's slab".¹ The body of history exists independently from the ultimately non-existent present, and the fallacies of anthropocentrism suggested in the idea of changing human history exist only within the historian. Therefore, it is evident that no event has the potential to change history in that, history in its nature is not truly susceptible to the suggested change.

¹ Carr, E.H. "*What is History*". P.9 (1961).

While such a concept as altering history is erroneous in nature, it is necessary to acknowledge that Covid-19 signifies a divergence from the trajectory of the early twenty-first century in its unpredictability. Although to some, the recent epidemics of Sars and Ebola highlighted a socially debilitating viral explosion as a matter of inevitability,² the majority of the global population was essentially blindsided by the transmission speed of Covid-19. This fact defines the pandemic and its repercussions as a point of deviation from the previously expected. These repercussions, far more so than the virus itself, with a theorised mortality rate of only between 0.5-1.0%,³ are especially pointed in the political and social change they have induced. The national lockdowns adopted by many world governments have demanded often unprecedented degrees of emergency powers awarded to the establishment. Unsurprisingly, such moves towards crisis autocracy are simultaneously moves away from democracy, with the annual report of Freedom House finding undermining of democracy and human rights in at least 80 countries, manifesting in forms such as electoral disruption, media censorship, and state police violence.⁴ Moreover, given the costly mismanagement of pandemic response in countries such as the USA and the UK, it is likely that such moves are not temporary, and rather demonstrate a realignment of a global political spectrum away from the Western model of democracy. As economic commentator Lawrence Summers suggests, the following years will see the world's navel shift to the East and authoritarian China, while the reputation of democracy has been irreversibly tarnished by the floundering and uncertain emergency responses of its supposed champions.⁵ While to an extent the pandemic serves merely to accelerate an already existing decline of the West and rise of the East, the dramatic scale that has been introduced is present in the mere contrast of the USA of 2020 with the USA of 2000. One unrivalled in a global hegemony, the other relying on China for imports of basic healthcare supplies. It is therefore apparent that the Covid-19 pandemic has at the very least greatly exacerbated political trajectories, and otherwise has brought about almost entirely unpredictable outcomes.

Moreover, the mutability of the anticipated course of history is not the limit of the change that Covid-19 may induce. Much as Carr described history itself as a static slab of fish, he places the onus of historical understanding almost entirely upon the historian. Yet, the historian, in process of review,

² See Bill Gates' article, "We're not ready for the next epidemic." 2015. [www.gatesnotes.com]. Accessed 22/01/2021.

³ The WHO theorise a figure of between 0.5-1.0% as an Infection Mortality Rate (IMR). "Estimating mortality from Covid-19". [www.who.int]. Accessed 24/01/2021.

⁴ Freedom House. S.Repucci and A.Slipowitz. "Democracy under Lockdown: Special Report 2020". [www.freedomhouse.org]. Accessed 22/01/2021.

⁵ Financial Times. Lawrence Summers. "Covid-19 looks like a hinge in history". [www.ft.com]. Accessed 22/01/2021.

applies aspects of their own societies and experiences. In that Ronald Syme, discoursing the collapse of the Roman Republic, echoes the contemporary fascist revolutions of his age, it is exemplified that objective history is adapted by the historian; so too will historians' perceptions be moulded by this pandemic. An excellent example on how Covid-19 may alter historical understanding is that of the European Union. Despite only in 2019 describing their own international institutions as "solid and powerful",⁶ the preliminary shock of the pandemic demonstrated that the claims of European cooperation were overtly side-lined in the interests of nationalism. As Covid-19 arrived in Italy and rapidly began to escalate, Prime Minister Conte issued a formal request for immediate aid to the European Commission in Brussels. However, in response to this, not a single EU member reacted with medical or financial assistance.⁷ While to some this simply indicates an element of unpreparedness, the lack of any form of response is indicative of a weakness in international cooperation: countries are simply unwilling to consider international interests when national interests are threatened. At the very least, the pandemic illustrates to historians and political analysts that the indomitable EU is not as politically united or strong as had been suggested in previous years, and further, this is reflective of a quieter trend towards nationalism; one must only consider the Trump administration's withdrawal from the WHO to see a more notorious example. Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic has permitted a sense of clarity and fresh understanding for the most recent periods of history, most keenly highlighting the facades of internationalism and progress.

Despite these future and retrospective shifts of global politics, even the sense of changing historical trajectory for the twentieth century is limited in the scope of its claims. With four different vaccine types already developed and several commercial variations increasingly becoming available worldwide,⁸ it is expected that the immediate healthcare dangers presented are soon to be greatly reduced. Further, even within the pandemic, governments are organising permanent national response systems for future threats of contagion.⁹ Yet, once the impacts of Covid-19 begin to recede, humanity will still be left with the same immediate problems as before. In truth, the pandemic may exacerbate existing crises. In the first quarter of 2020, world poverty was projected at around 9.4% of

⁶ European Council on Foreign Relations. C. de Gruyter. "Brexit is making Europe stronger". [www.ecfr.eu]. Accessed 24/01/2021.

⁷ Politico. D.M. Herszenhorn, C. Paun, and J. Deutsch. "Europe fails to help Italy in coronavirus fight". [www.politico.eu]. Accessed 24/01/2021.

⁸ Gavi: The Vaccine Alliance. "There are four types of Covid-19 vaccines: here's how they work". [www.gavi.org]. Accessed 26/01/2021.

⁹ US Department of Defense. "Coronavirus: Latest DOD Guidance." [www.defense.gov]. Accessed 25/01/2021.

the population; Covid-19 will have contributed to an estimated 150 million increase to this figure by March 2021.¹⁰ The caustic economic symptoms of the pandemic are however theorised to be generally short-term. In November 2020, the OECD forecasted a 4.2% growth in global economy for 2021 after a fall of the same value in the previous year.¹¹ The main divergence that OECD does acknowledge is again that China will displace the USA as the leading power during the recovery period.¹² Similar to the prevailing economic problems that are ultimately unresolved by pandemic measures, the climate crisis has continued to worsen; there were a disturbing 29 major tropical storms in the Atlantic, and 2020 was one of the hottest ever years on record.¹³ Although there was a 7% lull in fossil fuels after March 2020,¹⁴ this has begun to rapidly increase again in symbiotic recovery with the world economy. In this way, it is evident that the major global issues for humanity remain unresolved by pandemic responses and that, once the virus is inevitably contained and economic recovery undertaken, the world will, setting aside pedants raising the point of biological immunity, remain mostly unchanged, and by extension, human history will have been similarly immutable.

To conclude, the pandemic will have a substantial yet indirect impact on history. History in itself is simply a record and measure of events and as a consequence of its perpetual fluidity cannot be changed in as much as a river is nominally unchanged by the flowing of water. However, the future historian approaching this history will be influenced in understanding and in perception. The pandemic will mark a focal point in what some have labelled a 'Second Cold War'¹⁵ between the USA and China, in which China will emerge as a far more dominant power in terms of political influence and economic authority. In the contrast of their pandemic reactions, these superpowers have provided examples and inspiration to other nations, and the success in China will serve as an acceleration of Beijing's interest and the propagation of its autocratic brand as democracy begins to decline. Moreover, the pandemic measures and responses have illustrated misconceptions and overestimations in the strength of democracy and internationalism that will certainly adapt the necessary approach to analyse the period. Although it is true that global society has not been entirely upended by Covid-19, and economic and social recovery are more a matter of time and investment, it

¹⁰ The World Bank. "Covid-19 to Add as Many as 150 Million Extreme Poor by 2021". [www.worldbank.org]. Accessed 26/01/2021.

¹¹ VOA News. "World Economy Will Bounce Back in 2021, OECD Says". [www.voanews.com] Accessed 26/01/2021.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ BBC News. M. McGrath. "Climate Change: 2020 set to be one of the three warmest years on record". [www.bbc.co.uk]. Accessed 25/01/2020.

¹⁴ The Guardian. D. Carrington. "Climate crisis: 2020 was joint hottest year ever recorded". [www.theguardian.com]. Accessed 25/01/2021.

¹⁵ For example, see David Gelernter's article titled, "Welcome To Cold War II". Forbes. 2009. [www.web.archive.org].

has certainly at least catalysed and even extremified ongoing political trends. This will be the ultimate historical legacy on the virus, and while the continually unfolding history will remain inflexible in such a sense, interpretive history of the early twenty-first century will have been entirely remodelled around a new and unpredictable point of variation and inflection that is the Covid-19 pandemic.

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