

Will the Covid-19 pandemic change human history?

In his book *Sapiens*, Dr Yuval Noah Harari attempts to answer an eternal question: “how did our species succeed in the battle for dominance?” *Homo Sapiens*, it seems, like to think we are somehow evolutionarily omnipotent, residing at the top of an enormously complex food web. And yet, throughout history, we have fallen victim to the tiniest of predators. Across the ages, various explanations for these literal plagues on our existence have been proposed, ranging in accuracy and also in absurdity: miasma, a divine creator, even witchcraft. Currently, French microbiologist Louis Pasteur and his Germ Theory claim the kudos for the accepted explanation, and, as such, modern medicine progresses in leaps and bounds. Pathogens, most specifically, in this case, viruses, are of course the focus of all this discussion, and Covid-19 is the latest in a string of many, inextricably intertwined with the politics, religion, war, and peace that define our history.

As Bryan Walsh wrote for the BBC in March of this year, “nothing has killed more human beings than an infectious disease”. Human history has been riddled with plagues and sicknesses, and they have undoubtedly set the course for our 200,000 year stint on this planet. The coronavirus pandemic comes after the Ebola pandemic five years ago, which was preceded by the HIV/AIDS crisis of the early 1980s. Before this came the Asian flu pandemic of the late 1950s, the Spanish flu pandemic in the last year of World War One, and the cholera epidemics which repeatedly sickened Victorian Britain. If we go back several centuries, we will see the yellow fever outbreak in the newly-formed USA, and going back even further brings us to black death era Europe, most notably 1348’s pandemic, which killed up to 60% of Europe’s population. About 800 years prior, the Roman Empire suffered the Justinian plague, and 400 years prior to that the empire bore the brunt of the Antonine plague. We cannot forget, of course, society’s endemic killers – measles, smallpox, typhus. The conclusion we may draw from this long (and, frankly, scary) list is that history is full of – even defined by – various epidemics. These periods in the throes of sickness are inseparable from and influential over the rest of history: the best known example in this country is, perhaps, the government’s eventual (and reluctant) end to its feudal laissez-faire approach after the horrific extent of the cholera epidemics, and how it slowly led to the creation of the welfare state and the National Health Service. If the subject of this essay was, for example, “will the Covid-19 pandemic be of historical significance?”, then the answer would be, irrefutably, yes. We have the evidence – both historic and contemporary – to conclude that the pandemic will play a very large role in the story of the 21st century. Whether it will change it, however, is a different matter. Can history be changed? Is there a predetermined story set out for us, and has the coronavirus been an unexpected addition to the plot?

Change is transience, adaptation, causation and consequence. Are we adapting to the Covid-19 crisis? Yes, we are, as best we can. Society is adapting, and healthcare services are adapting. Is history itself adapting? Arguably not. History has not been set yet, so how can it adapt? It is true that the coronavirus pandemic will change many things – it has had massive impacts on civil liberties, the class divide, workers’ rights, and even the USA’s presidential election. One thing it cannot change, however, is history. History cannot be changed before it has been written, just as this essay cannot be edited before I have written it. The Covid-19 pandemic will not change history for this reason, and also for another: it is not yet part of it.

History is defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary as “past events considered together”. Allow me to pick this apart somewhat. I want to divide this definition into two parts: firstly, the idea of “past events”, and subsequently, the fact that they must be “considered together”. History is undeniably the study of “past events”, what has gone before, and how we reached the point we did. In this sense, the study of the Spanish or Asian flu pandemics or the black death’s devastating march across medieval Europe would certainly be considered history. The study of the Roman Empire’s wrestles with plagues is also history, although possibly considered ancient history or even classics. The study

of the Covid-19 pandemic cannot be described as history, at least not as I write this, and therefore the event itself cannot be considered part of history. It is modernity. It is science, and politics, and sociology. It is not history, because it is not a “past event”. Epidemiologists predict that the Covid-19 pandemic will not be a past event for several years, until a vaccine is found. Hence, the dictionary already denies the Coronavirus Crisis a seat at the historical table, and moreover this definition has been split into two: the dictionary goes on to deny it this seat twofold. The definition goes on to state that these events must be “considered together”. Assuming the two halves of this definition were mutually exclusive (so that whether the pandemic was considered to be in the past or not was irrelevant) is fruitless. How can one pandemic be “considered together”? Together with what? Arguably, we could consider the Covid-19 pandemic together with the Spanish flu pandemic, or even together with the effects it doubtlessly had on 2020’s other historical landmarks. However, we cannot do that yet. As an incomplete event, it has nothing to be considered together with yet. Thus, it cannot be considered part of history, and in turn this suggests it cannot change it. By definition, the Covid-19 pandemic cannot change history, because it is not even part of it.

Alternatively, it could be argued that history itself is subjective, and that the virus did, therefore, change it. There exists a concept of personal history – of each individual’s life story and that of their family and their friends, which, although most likely will have nothing to do with Edward the Confessor’s succession crisis or the War of the Roses, are most definitely history in their minds. The coronavirus had been responsible for 42,000 deaths in the United Kingdom alone by the start of October 2020, and for each and every one of those people, for their families, for their friends, it changed their personal history. 700 years on, close to zero people in the UK will be able to personally relate to the black death outbreak of 1348, and thus it did not – at least to their minds – actively change their personal history. However, we are not yet out of the woods with the Covid-19 Crisis, and hence it has affected and is affecting hundreds of thousands of people’s personal histories. Not every name of every victim will be inscribed in the history books, and yet for people across the globe, the Covid-19 pandemic has, undeniably, changed history.

Yet somehow, this argument fails to truly answer the question. History is a vast concept, a genuinely universal story, and it feels almost disrespectful to boil it down to individual stories among such a massive number. History itself, in my view, cannot have been changed by the pandemic.

1918 is a notable year for several reasons. The Great War came to an end in November, imperialism apparently suitably challenged for a few decades. The war is assumed to have amounted a death toll of somewhere between 20 and 40 million people. Nine months earlier, however, began the greatest international public health crisis the world had seen: Orthomyxoviridae Influenza A – or (much less of a mouthful) the Spanish flu – took a stand on the world stage. It is believed that around one third of the global population was infected with the virus, and up to 100 million people were killed by its deadly effects. Similarly, 2020 has seen a terrifying multitude of world events. The horrific realities of climate change have come into fruition across Australia, the USA, and even the meteorologically unassuming UK. Europe and North America have been swept by anti-racism protests, whilst simultaneously we have seen a distinct rise in right-wing (even fascist) politics across the globe. All this is of incredible historical importance, and yet all this has been overshadowed by the sheer enormity of the Covid-19 Crisis. Will it change human history, though? That in itself seems to be a contradiction in terms: history, by definition, cannot be changed. It can only be written. Therefore, I find it difficult to agree that the pandemic will *change* history, although it will undoubtedly have gargantuan effects throughout our culture. Definitively, history cannot begin to even include the Covid-19 pandemic in its study, and the crisis could not change history regardless. Hence, we cannot suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic will change history, not because of the nature of the pandemic, but because of the nature of history itself.