

Will the Covid-19 pandemic change human history?

Like “trying to drive a toaster through a carwash” as Kevin Bacon’s character Jack Swigert says in the 1995 film *Apollo 13*, it is high risk for the historian to attempt to understand the impact of an unfinished and contemporary event. The apparent hyperbole of news reporting and social media – “unprecedented”, “new normal”, may yet turn out to be useful summaries of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on human history. However, past trends and patterns teach us much. In learning about the past, we also learn of our present and our future, which is why it is worth taking the risk to consider how extraordinary Covid-19 is for human history. This should help inform current thinking and historians in the future.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a forthright reminder we remain subject to forces beyond our control. Since the Sumerian civilisation reached the critical population density thought necessary for epidemic-level contagion in around 3000BC, communicable disease has been one of the biggest single threats to humanity, and by extension a shaper of human history and in competition with war and famine.

Yet on the basis of the available evidence, the infection and mortality rates and impacts (both immediate and longer term) for Covid-19 are low when compared with past pandemics. For example, the smallpox which devastated the Aztec population (of whom about 90% were killed) thus playing a significant role in the victory of the conquistadors in the Battle of Tenochtitlan, 1521, is an obvious driver allowing Spanish colonial domination in Latin America in the 16th and 17th centuries - and represents a major shift in world history. During the late 18th century, smallpox was rife in England, infecting ninety-five in one hundred people, killing one in seven of those. Cycles of smallpox were “a fixture, a permanent structure in men’s lives” (Braudel, 1981) throughout that time until Jenner’s development of the vaccine at the end of the century. Both the disease and the invention of vaccination have impacted on human history in a way Covid-19 is unlikely to. At the time of writing, Covid-19 has claimed two million lives. An estimated 500 million people died after contracting smallpox in the last one hundred years of its existence – five million deaths for every year (Henderson, 2009). While the higher mortality rates of previous epidemics in no way alleviate the tragedy of the current situation, they put into perspective the Covid-19 pandemic as objectively minor. It seems likely that Covid-19 will join similar viruses with seasonal cycles (controlled by vaccination programmes), eventually becoming factored minor adjustments into our annual routines. The structures of everyday life have transformed temporarily through government implemented restrictions in most countries (through management of disease which was lacking in the 1700s) but will be likely be largely withdrawn and swiftly forgotten post-pandemic.

That is not to say Covid-19 will not contribute to enduring socio-cultural change. Taylor’s 1926 *Hemline Index*, arguing that women’s hemline lengths are an accurate reflection of economic prosperity (i.e., the shorter the skirt, the stronger the economy) illustrates the kind of interaction between society and economic damage of the scale Covid-19 has already brought about. All forms of media are looking forward to a new “roaring twenties” where immediate gratification and various forms of hedonism in North America and Europe will follow the removal of social distancing. The miniskirt may be further revived. Equally, a prolonged period of austerity and caution is not unusual following a crisis. Cultural responses should not be underestimated as making a mark on human history. The likelihood of more cautious attitudes towards hygiene is strong, especially in places

where mask-wearing was not previously the norm. The warnings about the waning power of antibiotics may be taken more seriously. The collective consciousness of generations who live through pandemics does shape human history as they factor into the zeitgeist. After the Black Death in Europe, 1349, a sense of depression and a hysteria about death pervaded aspects of society: from crime rates doubling in a decade to the swing between religious fervour and suspicion, to all things macabre imbuing the arts and culture. Crises are opportunities for change, catalysed by the brutal lessons they teach. The creation of the UK's National Health Service in 1948 reflected the practical need for recovery from different injuries and a sense of determination for a different sort of social compact. Yet, while there is much talk of kindness and community and no doubt in the sincerity of those who have clapped for heroes in Britain there is little sense of the scale of change brought about by the Second World War, for example. The strength of the argument that frugality and prudence will be the guiding principles for most, or government at least, is more likely to prevail – practical action to address child poverty in Britain is driven by small actions provoked by celebrities like Marcus Rashford rather than a shift to much greater wealth redistribution. Hoping for a re-evaluation of values and priorities within society which lead to tangible change – higher wages for social care workers, for example – seems optimistic.

Equally, Covid-19 will be an accelerator of social, political, technological and economic change. However, we should try not to overly conflate socio-political movements and unrest, such as the Black Lives Matter campaign, with the upheaval, fear and uncertainty caused by the coronavirus pandemic. In the 2020 US presidential election, the chaos of Covid-19 may have exploited one of Trump's weaknesses, but the contagion of outrage for social justice and general political polarisation which fuelled the BLM protests goes back much farther than the Covid-19 pandemic and will outlive it.

The comparative lack of action in some parts of world, for example Jair Bolsonaro's persistent denial of the virus in Brazil, should not be used to reinforce the narrative of a rise in totalitarian regimes. Arguably though, levels of state surveillance and control over people is being extended by Covid-19. The fearful power and beauty of the internet is starkly exposed. There are examples of the Covid-19 pandemic accelerating the integration of technology used by governments to monitor citizens all around world. For example, the Israeli use of technology normally used in the military or against terrorists to monitor potentially infected citizens. There is a possibility (and a risk) that we become desensitised to governments having ready access to sensitive personal data (our body temperature, location and interactions, for example) and this in turn will have a profound and transformative effect on politics and democracy in particular as well as wider society. More likely is that it will accelerate and be used to enable existing policies and practices with impacts being felt most strongly in authoritarian countries with reasonably good technological infrastructure like China and that in democracies the most draconian measures will be ameliorated or removed as happened with the 1914 Defence of the Realm Act in Britain.

The pressure to maintain "normal" working and social arrangements during periods of lockdown has brought the internet centre-stage. Corporations and small businesses have appreciated how much can be achieved without air miles, religious events have enjoyed a surge in attendance, with Zoom, FaceTime and WhatsApp having become verbs which connect us inter-generationally. As regards the endurance of this after the crisis - it seems likely that humans will revert to type, taking the benefits of convenience (time, economic and environmental savings) while eschewing the lack of personal

contact for which we are hard-wired, giving rise to little more than an adjustment to our patterns of interaction. All discussion about how the pandemic has shifted our ideas around a wide range of issues up to this point, and how it will do so in the future is premature, particularly since recent debate about 'vaccine nationalism' highlights that even in high-income countries production of a vaccine is not of itself going to resolve the crisis.

The Covid-19 pandemic beginning in 2020 has some unique features and has presented a global threat. Future historians will undoubtedly recognise and reference this but at this point it does not seem that it will be a pivot point in human history. Surely other epidemiological events, such as smallpox up to its eradication in 1980 or the Influenza of 1918, will be of greater relevance to a historian considering the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This does not take away from the millions of personal tragedies caused by Covid-19 but should also make us reflect, remember and learn from the many other more serious epidemics in the past and try better to understand both the micro and the macro impacts.

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