The 2020 *Historical Research* lecture

Writing histories of 2020: first responses and early perspectives*

Richard Vinen  
*King’s College London*

Claire Langhamer  
*University of Sussex*

Kevin Siena  
*Trent University, Ontario*

Abstract

The 2020 *Historical Research* lecture, ‘Writing histories of 2020’, asked how future historians might study and understand the global coronavirus pandemic. The lecture brought together historians with three distinctive perspectives: contemporary history and writing of the very recent past, histories of record keeping and current archive creation, and the history of contagious disease and its human consequences. The three speakers, Richard Vinen, Claire Langhamer and Kevin Siena, provided early responses on future histories of 2020 and how we might best prepare the ground for these studies. This article provides written versions of these commentaries. Common to each of the contributions, and subsequent discussion, is the ongoing challenge and responsibility of thinking historically at a time when history is clearly ‘in the making’.

Preface

The I.H.R.’s *Historical Research* lecture, which takes places each July, offers scholars an opportunity to discuss approaches to and methods for studying the past. In February of this year, plans for the 2020 lecture were in place. Then of course plans everywhere began to change. It became apparent that our proposed lecture could not happen, though we sincerely hope to hold this, with its distinguished historian, at the Institute’s London home in summer 2021.

In rethinking the focus and format of this year’s lecture, it was clear there was one subject we could not avoid: coronavirus and its implications for historical understanding and research. So extensive is this subject that we chose to approach it from three viewpoints, those of the contemporary historian, the historian of mass archiving and record keeping, and the historian of earlier episodes of contagious disease. Prior to the lecture, our three speakers – Richard Vinen, Claire Langhamer and Kevin Siena – were invited to consider the events of 2020 from the perspective of their research specialisms, and to offer some ‘first responses and early perspectives’ on ‘writing histories of 2020’.

* The lecture can be seen at <https://www.history.ac.uk/ihr-hrlecture-2020>. After the event, Jo Fox spoke further to Claire Langhamer and Richard Vinen. Both conversations are part of the IHR’s ‘History in Conversation’ podcast <https://soundcloud.com/history-in-conversation>.  

© The Author(s) 2020. DOI: 10.1093/hisres/htaa029  
*Historical Research*, vol. XX, no. XX (XXXX 2020)

Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of Institute of Historical Research. All rights reserved.

For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com
This year’s lecture, chaired by the I.H.R.’s director, Jo Fox, took place online on 29 July with an international audience running into the hundreds. We thank the journal’s publisher, Oxford University Press, for supporting and promoting this year’s lecture in its new format. In their presentations and in the subsequent discussion, our three speakers raised topics including how historians best engage with events that are so evidently ‘history in the making’; how the Covid–19 pandemic might reshape historians’ periodization of the early twenty-first century; the form that global histories of this global event might take; what records we should keep for future histories, and who decides how we remember; and how far historians’ experience of researching and explaining earlier outbreaks of contagious disease, from plagues to HIV/AIDS, might inform preparations for histories of 2020.

We are extremely grateful to Richard, Claire and Kevin for engaging so thoughtfully with these, and other, questions of historical purpose and method in an environment of such uncertainty; and also for writing up their contributions while preparing for new ways of working in the current academic year. This professionalism enables their talks to appear in the final issue of Historical Research to appear in 2020: at a time when the outcomes of the coronavirus pandemic remain unclear, and future histories of 2020 to be decided.

The Editors

* 

How will we see history through the prism of Covid? 

Richard Vinen

In the general confusion, he set himself to be the historian of that which has no history. Camus, La Peste (1947).

Historians, as Camus knew, have talked about plague since ancient times but the topic did not feature much in the historiography in the early twentieth century. Perhaps this was because historians then were primarily interested in Europe and plague seemed to have ceased to be significant in much of that continent or perhaps it was because they were primarily concerned with explicitly political issues. A celebrated exception was James Westfall Thompson’s essay of 1921, comparing the social effects of the Great War and the Black Death, but even this seemed to occlude the influence of disease in recent times and did not mention the fact that there had been a flu pandemic in 1918. Since the 1950s, however, plague has acquired many historians. It was a subject of particular interest to those innovative scholars associated with Annales in France and with Past & Present in Britain. Some epidemics of the pre-industrial period – the Black Death in Europe and the diseases that all but wiped out the indigenous population of some Oceanic countries after the arrival of the first Europeans – were seen as agents of revolutionary social change in themselves; though, in recent years, historians of Europe have mainly argued that the Black Death accelerated changes that would have happened anyway. Later diseases – particularly cholera in the nineteenth century – were studied for what they revealed about the social and political structure of affected areas. Margaret Pelling took a different approach, arguing that epidemics – sharp moments of crisis – are less useful to the social historian than the study of more persistent, endemic, diseases, such as tuberculosis.
Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s study of the ‘microbial unification of the world’ in the late medieval/early modern period sought to transcend the distinction between endemic and epidemic diseases. He argued that the latter were not best understood as moments of crisis. Instead he brought a Braudelian emphasis on the long, or at least medium, term to the study of plague. Individual outbreaks might seem terrifying and incomprehensible in the speed with which they worked their effects, but plague was endemic or, to use Le Roy Ladurie’s rather Trumpian formulation, ‘chez elle’ in Asia. Once individual plagues had been ‘digested by global history’, they would appear as successive waves of a single phenomenon that were transmitted by new means of trade and communication rather than as isolated events. Disease was thus to be distinguished from the événementiel timescale of political history.

How will future historians fit Covid into this kind of analysis? It will be a prism through which we will look at other historical episodes as well as, one day, being an object of historical analysis in itself. This means that how we will think about the period before Covid will depend partly on what comes after. It also means that any historical discussion of Covid is subject to much uncertainty. Now (I am writing in September 2020 and what I say may be out of date by the time that I correct proofs) we cannot even be sure about the purely biological trajectory of Covid, let alone about its social and political fall-outs. Having said this, in two respects, Covid seems new. The first of these concerns the speed with which it has exercised its effects. It has only come to human attention in the last eight months. Its total life so far, to use an analogy that Braudel and Ladurie would have recognized, is shorter than that of one of the more robust governments of the French Fourth Republic. The speed of its spread also means that Covid has affected the whole world at more or less the same time. Peter Baldwin wrote that reactions to infectious diseases in the nineteenth and early twentieth century owed much to ‘geoepidemiological position’, by which he meant that some places were exposed earlier and more severely to epidemics. Now, by contrast, no country is protected by its geographical position and, indeed, Covid seems to have been most successfully contained in the very region where it originated. Past historians have drawn lessons about, say, Giolotti’s Italy or liberal Hamburg, from responses to a particular outbreak of disease. Future historians will write global accounts of Covid though these histories may also involve a return to something that has been unfashionable in recent years: comparison between different countries. Responses to Covid remind us that states remain important but also that there are such things as national societies – Korea, Sweden and New Zealand have had different experiences of Covid partly because Koreans, Swedes and New Zealanders behave in particular ways.

Reference to global history, however, raises a question. Will Covid, which seems, as we experience it in the West, to operate in such a short time-scale, be seen in same way to historians who write its broader history? Back in 1973 and even when writing about

4 E. Le Roy Ladurie, ‘Un concept: l’unification microbienne du monde (XIVe-XVIIe Siècles’, in Le territoire de l’historien (2 vols., Paris, 1974–8), ii. 37–97.
5 Le Roy Ladurie, Histoire des paysans français de la Peste noire à la Révolution (Paris, 2002), p. 21.
6 Le Roy Ladurie discussed the links between plagues and événementiel history in his essay ‘Événement et longue durée dans l’histoire sociale: l’exemple chouan’, in Le Territoire de l’Historien, i. 169–86, at p. 171: ‘Les catastrophes épidémiques n’apparaissent plus, dans cette perspective réductrice, que comme l’aboutissement logique d’une expansion inconsiderée du nombre des hommes, du commerce, des raids militaires et de la colonisation. Elles perdent leur caractère d’événement unique. Elles sont digérées par l’histoire globale’.
7 P. Baldwin, Contagion and the State in Europe, 1830–1930 (Cambridge, 1999), p. 555.
8 R. Evans, Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years: 1830–1910 (London, 1988); F. Snowden, Naples in the Time of Cholera, 1884–1911 (Cambridge, 1995).
the pre-modern period, Le Roy Ladurie hinted that a new kind of ‘microbiological unification’ brought about by mass air travel might be about to transform the world. Diseases transmitted in this way would include other varieties of influenza but they might also include AIDS – the ‘patient zero’ that historians once identified at the origin of the disease’s spread in North America was a flight attendant. One might also note that Covid did not seem equally shocking in parts of the world that had already been affected by what one might term the ‘jet plagues’. This is obviously true of Hong Kong, which has been relatively successful in containing Covid partly because of its recent experience with other varieties of influenza. It is also true of Kenya, where the casualties of Covid are still dwarfed by those of ‘the time of death’ that came during the early years of AIDS.9

The second novelty of Covid concerns not the disease itself but the response to it by governments, media and society, and these certainly have functioned on an événementiel time scale. Covid has been seen as a matter for political intervention. Indeed politics in almost every country has revolved around Covid for the last six months. There is nothing inevitable about this. The epidemic of influenza that broke out at the end of the First World War was not seen as a central concern of political life. AIDS had a political effect in Haiti – the economic crisis produced by a sharp decline in tourism brought about revolution – but it had remarkably little political impact in rich countries, not even in San Francisco or New York where infection rates were relatively high. Perhaps the politicization of Covid is explained partly by the fact that handling the disease has so often been described in terms of ‘war’ and war is so obviously a matter for the state. Furthermore, today’s politicians – unlike, say, the military doctors and engineers who sought to contain Malaria in British-ruled India10 – tend to assume that the ‘war’ against the virus is a total one that will only finish with complete victory.11 They do not anticipate the containment and cohabitation that has marked humanity’s relation with AIDS, cholera or malaria and that has proved, at least so far as rich people in rich countries are concerned, relatively tolerable. The Covid crisis has been further dramatized by the media. In 1971, Pierre Nora, discussing the ‘return of the event’ to historiography, referred to ‘monster events’ that were magnified by the effects of the mass media.12 Covid has proved to be the monster event par excellence and its effects have been magnified by rolling news, the internet and also by the economic crisis of newspapers and broadcasters, itself exacerbated by the Covid lockdown, which has made them ever hungrier for controversial stories.

Covid has also occurred at a curious moment in the history of democracy. It is often said that populist revolts illustrate a lack of faith in politicians. In fact, though respect for politicians is very low, faith in them is high. Indeed, it is precisely because electorates seem convinced that politicians could do anything – reverse the economic rise of China, negotiate a Brexit deal that would involve no concessions on the British side – that ‘failure’ attracts such a heavy price. One is struck, in retrospect, by the extent to which strong politicians of a few decades ago emphasized the limits on their power. Kissinger anticipated that the West would have to accept the existence of the Soviet Union for

9 P. Wenzel Geissler and R. J. Prince, ‘Layers of epidemic: present pasts during the first weeks of covid-19 in western Kenya’, Centaurus, lxi (2020), 248–56.
10 S. Watts, British development policies and malaria in India, 1897–c. 1929, Past & Present, clix (1999), 141–81.
11 President Nixon’s campaign to eradicate cancer, launched in 1971, was also often presented as a ‘war’. One might add that Nixon’s campaign also sometimes seemed to echo Kennedy’s ambition to put a man on the moon. Governments in 2020 have sometimes referred back to aspects of the space race and its attendant culture – hence Boris Johnson’s ‘moonshot’ vaccine; Russia’s ‘Sputnik V’ vaccine and Donald Trump’s claim that research would proceed at ‘warp speed’.
12 P. Nora, ‘L’événement monstre’, Communications, xviii (1972), 162–72.
hundreds of years; de Gaulle insisted that he could do nothing to restore the nineteenth century world, ‘oil lamps and the fleet at sail’, the passing of which he regretted; Thatcher told voters that she could not ‘buck the market’. Now, by contrast, politicians are expected to offer opinions on, and solutions to, almost every problem and this means that anything that might, in any way, be linked to Covid is transformed into a political matter.

How will Covid influence how future historians periodize their studies? Peter Hennessy has suggested that there will be a B.C. and an A.C. – a before and after Covid. He has also implied that Covid might be a turning point as important as the Second World War (at least so far as Britain is concerned) and even argued that a kind of ‘second Beveridge report’ might provide ‘an appropriate memorial to the Covid fallen’. Hennessy’s reference to 1945 has special resonance because the early stages of the Covid lockdown coincided with the seventy-fifth anniversary of allied victory in Europe. This anniversary was marked with particular fervor in Britain where references to Covid have also become associated with a wider piety about the Second World War, partly because the ‘Covid fallen’ often belong to the generation that reached adulthood during the war. The queen (born in 1926) alluded to the wartime songs of Dame Vera Lynn and a fly-past of Spitfires marked the anniversary of the National Health Service. One might also point out that memories of 1945 tend to be relatively benign in Britain precisely because British casualties in the war (though very much higher than even the worst predictions for the number of ‘Covid fallen’) were small compared to those of other countries. To put matters in perspective, the number of Japanese killed in the first fifteen minutes after the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 (a date that is helpfully removed from national memory by the new focus on V.E. day) was greater than the number of all the British people who died with Covid until 6 August 2020.

Periodizing British, let alone world, history in a way that suggested some parity between 1945 and Covid, would have interesting consequences. Not only would it create a new chronological frontier but it would sweep away some previous ones. R. W. Johnson (born in 1943) wrote in 1985:

When I was growing up people always referred to the times through which we were living as ‘the post-war period’. After many years of this I became discontented: when would a new period start? Didn’t history ever change and move on? We know the answer to this now. The post-war period ended in 1973 and a new era began. Clearly, I should not have been so impatient. For all the difficulties of this time the period from 1945 to 1973 is likely to be remembered as something of a golden age: no world wars, sweeping emancipation from colonial rule, growing détente between East and West, continuous and headlong economic growth. The period which began in 1973 looks altogether less hopeful and at worst it looks positively frightening.

Many historians have followed Johnson’s lead and much writing on the three post-war decades (at least so far as western Europe and North America is concerned) revolves around the notion of a ‘golden age’. This interpretation has also sometimes gone with a certain lack of attention to the details of what happened in the period. Peace and prosperity can be dull. Geof Eley referred to his own youth in the ‘safe but dispiriting landscapes of the long postwar’. By contrast, the period since the mid 1970s is often presented as being crowded with momentous historical events. Le Débat, the journal

13 P. Hennessy, ‘After Covid 19’ <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/mei/news-and-opinion/items/after-covid19---lord-peter-hennessy.html> [accessed 2 Oct. 2020].
14 The celebration of V.E. day is something of a novelty in Britain. In 1995, the 40th anniversary of the end of the Second World War was marked on a day that lay between the German and Japanese surrender.
15 R. W. Johnson, The Politics of Recession (London, 1985), p. vii.
16 G. Eley, A Crooked Line: from Cultural History to the History of Society (Chicago, Ill., 2005), p. 173.
founded by Pierre Nora, recently devoted an issue to 1979 as a ‘turning point’ in world history. The terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001 or the financial crash of 2007/8 were accorded ‘historic’ status almost as soon as they happened.

There are two obvious, but radically different ways, in which Covid might make us rethink periodization. First, the consequences of the pandemic might be so dramatic and malign that they will overshadow all of recent history – perhaps making the importance attributed to, say, the financial crash seem overstated. Rather than seeing a postwar golden age that ended in the 1970s, we may, instead, see the whole period from 1945 to 2020 as a unity, characterized by continuous economic growth; indeed, in parts of the world, and even parts of western Europe, economic growth was faster in the decades after 1975 than it had been during the ‘golden age’. If Covid has dramatic effects on the political life of countries or the relations between them, it may also be that future historians will be struck by the absence of direct conflict between great powers in the seventy-five years after 1945 and by the spread of liberalism and democracy in this period. The years between the end of the Cold War and the outbreak of Covid may be reconsidered. This period has not had a good press from historians – in part, one suspects, because many were keen to distance themselves from what they saw as the naïve triumphalism of Francis Fukuyama’s *End of History* (1992). Perhaps, though, these years will come to seem benign in retrospect – much as the years immediately before the First World War were, eventually, defined as the European *Belle Époque*.18

Alternatively, if the disease is contained quickly and economies recover fast, Covid may be seen as a comparatively trivial episode. Perhaps, indeed, it will be regarded as another example of the febrile propensity of observers in the early twenty-first century to attribute ‘historical’ importance to every event. Far from being regarded as an episode of comparable importance to the Second World War, future historians may suggest that reactions to Covid illustrate the ways in which people, in Europe and North America at least, had forgotten what real historical upheaval might look like.

A feature of the historical self-consciousness that has gone with Covid is a desire to collect sources that might one day be used to write accounts of the pandemic. In this domain, as in so much else, Covid seems to have accelerated changes that were already in train – though these changes do not all involve moves in the same direction. On the one hand, historians are interested in ‘big data’. Covid itself has been understood largely through statistical representations. Some of this will be studied to ask obvious questions. Cliometricians will turn away from simple numbers of those who ‘died with Covid’ to ask how far overall mortality was affected by Covid and/or by the measures taken to contain the disease. However, the big data will also cast light on all sorts of other matters. Measures against Covid are intrusive and intrusion is the friend of the historian. One assumes that historians of China – using databases of information derived from mobile phones – will, one day, be able to reconstruct the movements of every person in Shanghai in more detail than historians of medieval Europe can hope to reconstruct the progress of a royal tour.

17 In 1993, Eric Hobsbawm wrote that there was ‘less reason now to feel optimistic than in the mid 1980s’ (E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: the Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London, 1993)).

18 D. Khalifa, *La véritable histoire de la Belle Époque* (Paris, 2017). Note that the term was first used in a radio series broadcast during the Second World War.
However, historians are also interested in the more small-scale and subjective information that might be yielded by ‘ego-documents’, such as interviews or life writing. Many institutions have responded to Covid by encouraging the collection of personal testimonies – diaries, photographs and interviews – relating to the experience of individuals. But the treatment of personal testimony has changed in recent years and it seems likely that Covid will change it further. ‘Ego-documents’ were not always seen as simple acts of self-expression. Often, they involved witnesses who had been compelled to reveal things that they found painful. This was obviously the case of those early modern testimonies that were collected by the Inquisition. It was true in a less literal sense of much continental work that informed by a sense of political confession, particularly by former Stalinists. Two of the most important works in this genre – Edgar Morin’s Autocritique (1959) and Arthur London’s The Confession (1968) – deliberately turned communist techniques of self-criticism against the authors’ own communist pasts. Morin’s work, in turn, had an important influence on how French historians (particularly those grouped in Pierre Nora’s collection on Ego-histoire) saw their own lives. By contrast, more recent ego-documents owe much to experiences of counselling or therapy – processes that encourage the individual to regard talking about themselves as benign and as a matter of endless interest to their interlocutors. The rise of social media has encouraged a sense that all personal accounts are of equal value.

The Covid lockdown raises questions about personal testimony. Once such testimonies were valued because of what they said about society as a whole. A witness was useful either because they were themselves engaged in some important social or political process or because they commented on what they saw – early Mass Observation reports were largely intended to provide information about someone other than the person writing the report. However, in recent years, testimony has been increasingly valued not because of what it says about society but because of what it says about ‘the self’. Lockdown testimonies – sometimes produced by people who are not able to leave their homes – reinforces this tendency. Covid also raises questions, or perhaps reinforces questions that have already been raised, about the historian’s relation to the subjectivities of those that they study. Even scholars who were particularly sympathetic to those that they studied once recognized that the views of their subjects might be, in some objective sense, wrong or, in E. P. Thompson’s famous phrase ‘deluded’. Academic cultures have changed. Historians often talk about their subjects – particularly when those subjects are still alive – with something bordering on deference. This propensity is increased by the fact that the collection of testimony is often governed by rules on ‘research ethics’, largely derived from medical research, which means that providers of testimony are sometimes granted an effective veto about how historians might quote them. Perhaps this goes with a more general shift. Historians of subjectivity or emotion may be objective and detached;
indeed, an emphasis on the cultural construction of emotion might encourage a certain cold-bloodedness. However, in the last few years, some historians have come to feel that they ought themselves to be emotionally engaged with their subjects – something that can be seen, for example, in reactions to the Black Lives Matter campaign. Covid, which has encouraged even epidemiologists to preface all reference to mortality statistics with the word ‘sadly’, has exacerbated this tendency.

There is one curious and noteworthy absence in much discussion of emotional reactions to Covid and that is death. People talk of loneliness, separation and fear but not of what the end of life itself might mean. This may be partly because the number of deaths is relatively low. It is also because the very measures taken to contain Covid have tended to reinforce a phenomenon identified by Geoffrey Gorer when he remarked that death has become, in the literal sense of the word, obscene – that is, it happens away from the public gaze. Covid victims, of course, have usually died in particular isolation and even funerals have sometimes been limited or curtailed. There was once a close association between plague, death and religion. Some Muslims believed that fleeing from a plague-stricken area was itself impious and, as late as 1832, British legislation intended to contain the spread of Cholera referred to the will of God. Camus’ *La Peste* (1947) – is largely about religious questions, in spite, or because, of the fact that the author was not a believer. Now, in the West at least, religious references have been striking by their absence during the pandemic – there was little protest about the closure of places of worship in most countries. Perhaps this brings us back to the politicization of Covid and the sense that it presents problems that ought, in the public mind, to be ‘soluble’ rather than merely ones that present opportunities à la Camus for heroic but hopeless struggles against the absurdity of life and death.

Much of the discussion of the pandemic has involved reference to social inequality. However, this sits oddly with the fact that historians (and almost all social commentators) are less and less likely to talk about social class, which would, fifty years ago, have been the most important category of analysis for many of them. The history of class once meant, in large measure, the history of the working class. Now middle-class attributes – home ownership or university education – are increasingly taken for granted and ‘inequality’ is often perceived, in rather Pikettyesque terms, as something that divides ‘ordinary people’ from the very rich. But the interest in workers has declined even among those who work on periods when they made up the majority of the population. The emphasis on ego documents, of course, implicitly privileges those who are relatively articulate, who have a degree of leisure and who belong to those social groups that assume that their experiences and opinions might be of interest to others. This tends to mean the middle class – though not necessarily the most privileged fraction of it. Indeed, one might argue that the ‘history from below’ of the 1960s has been replaced by a kind of ‘history from the middle’, particularly with regard to the recent past.

---

23 Gorer’s ideas were first set out in an essay for *Encounter* on ‘The pornography of death’, which was published in 1955. His essay was reprinted as an appendix to his book *Death Grief and Morning in Contemporary Britain* (London, 1965). Gorer’s book was an anthropological study based on questionnaires and interviews though it also contained an autobiographical introduction. Gorer suffered from ‘Asian flu’ in 1918 – though he mentions that epidemic only to describe how it influenced his attitudes to the Armistice (his father had been killed in the war). He says nothing about the effects of the epidemic itself on mortality.

24 Note the contrast with AIDS, which did entail much discussion of death – perhaps because the early victims of AIDS were mostly young and because, though their actual deaths may have occurred in private, they were conspicuously dying for such a long time. Perhaps too because western society was less secular in the 1980s than it is now and because AIDS was sometimes discussed in terms of sin and punishment.

25 Briggs, ‘Cholera and society in the nineteen century’. 
Covid has reinforced this tendency to take a middle-class perspective for granted. Big data analysis is likely to miss that section of the population (a small one in industrialized countries but quite a big one on a global scale) who have no mobile phones and no regular access to healthcare. It is significant that reactions to Covid have revolved around that supremely middle-class institution ‘the home’. Even in rich countries, there are parts of the population that live on the streets or who share cramped rented rooms. In the world as a whole, huge parts of the population still earn their living from manual labour – one reason for the decline in the working-class population of Europe and North America is simply that certain kinds of jobs have been exported. Huge parts of the world’s population also still live in great poverty. One assumes that the notion of ‘staying at home’ must seem odd to those who live in shanty towns or refugee camps or to the Indian migrants labourers who were forced to take to the roads at a few hours’ notice when the Indian government announced its lockdown in March 2020.

One should finish by emphasizing, again, that how historians will look back on Covid will depend largely on what comes after it. It may be followed by, and perhaps partly cause, wider social and political changes that will come to put the disease itself in a brutal perspective. A Hamburg doctor recalled that the cholera epidemic of 1892 was ‘like the caesura, the great divide between the Hamburg old and new’. But one of his contemporaries remarked that the sense of the history as being divided into ‘before’ and ‘after’ cholera was eventually overshadowed by the even more terrible events of the Great War.26 Historians who study the fifteen years after 1930 will feel a chill run through them when economists announce that the economic contraction of the last few months is worse than that of the inter-war depression.

The pandemic is not an existential threat. It will not wipe humanity out and it will not, in itself, undermine established institutions. We would do well to heed Margaret Pelling’s reminder that we should pay more attention to the undramatic but persistent causes of mortality – ‘bosom vipers’ – rather than to the spectacular effects of pandemic. One might add that in large parts of the world people still die from conditions that would be easily prevented or treated in rich countries. Indeed vipers are more than a figure of speech in this context. According to the World Health Organization, a million Indians have died from snakebites in the last decade (the W.H.O. estimated deaths from Covid in the first eight months of 2020 at about 800,000). Cobras and kraits may account for as many as 1 per cent of deaths among agricultural labourers in low-lying wet areas.27 Many in such places would recognize the words that John McManners wrote with regard to eighteenth century France: ‘Particular diseases were the indispensable infantry in Death’s dark armies but his generals were Cold and Hunger’.28

One should also note that there are still some threats to humanity that might realistically be described as ‘existential’. One of these, not talked about much in recent years though it has hardly gone away, is nuclear war – the prospect of which seemed so haunting in the 1980s that even historians writing about disease in the nineteenth century evoked it.29 The second threat, discussed almost obsessively in recent years, is climate change. One effect of Covid may be to stimulate a wider change in how historians perceive relations with the natural world and, particularly, what timescale they see those relations operating on. Adam Tooze, who began 2020 writing a book about climate change and finished

26 Evans, Death in Hamburg, p. 565.
27 <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/10-07-2020-study-estimates-more-than-one-million-indians-died-from-snakebite-envenoming-over-past-two-decades> [accessed 2 Oct. 2020].
28 J. McManners, Death and the Enlightenemnt (Oxford, 1985), p. 23.
29 Evans, Death in Hamburg, p. 568.
it writing on Covid, remarked that he had anticipated that man’s relations with the Anthropocene might best be understood as being a ‘war of attrition’ but now appreciated that such relations might also be like a ‘Blitzkrieg’. Perhaps it would be appropriate to finish by returning to the Annales school at the height of the Braudelian emphasis on the *longue durée* and to the work of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. In 1959 he wrote:

The links between man and climate no longer have that urgency that they had until the late eighteenth century in essentially agricultural societies always dominated by the difficult problems of subsistence.

*

Mass-Observing the pandemic

*Claire Langhamer*

In May 2020 the Mass-Observation Archive asked members of the public to record a day in their life for posterity. The ‘May the twelfth’ diary was inaugurated back in 1937 when Mass-Observation recruited a group of what it called ‘ordinary hard-working folk’, to record the details of their lives on the twelfth of every month. This was to lead up to a record of everyday life on a particular day: 12 May 1937 – the date set for King George VI’s coronation. An anthology containing over 200 of these accounts was published later that year and offered an account of coronation day that was markedly more complex than those offered by the national press. It was out of these day surveys that Mass-Observation’s more widely known wartime diaries and directives emerged; indeed these had replaced the May the twelfth diaries by the time the Second World War had started. It was not until 2010 that the ‘new’ Mass-Observation Project revived the 12th May Diary idea and it has since made the call on a yearly basis. 12 May 2020 marked the tenth anniversary of the re-animated Project.

12 May 2020 was a Tuesday and it should have been an ordinary working day for most of us. Yet this particular 12 May was, as one of the diarists explained, ‘anything but ordinary’. ‘As we post this call the UK is in lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic’ the Archive staff had explained the previous month, ‘We don’t know how life will be on the 12th May, but we would like your help to document it. Please tell your family and friends. It will be valuable to have a collection from people of all ages across the UK’. Potential contributors were asked to send electronic copies, if at all possible, because the Archive itself was closed. Schoolchildren and community groups were specifically encouraged to get involved. In an acknowledgement of the difficulties many parents faced over these months it was suggested that ‘This may be an activity for

---

30 <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/08/adam-tooze-how-will-the-covid-19-pandemic-change-world-history.html> [accessed 2 Oct. 2020].
31 E. Le Roy Ladure, ‘Histoire et Climat’, in *Le territoire de l’historien*, i. 424–55 (first published in *Annales* in 1959).
32 Mass-Observation material is used by permission of the Mass-Observation Trustees. I would particularly like to thank Jessica Scantlebury, the Mass-Observation supervisor, for making these materials available to me.
33 Mass-Observation Archive (M.O.A.), File Report A26, ‘They Speak for Themselves. A Radio Enquiry into Mass-Observation with Tom Harrison and Charles Madge’, 1 June 1939.
34 *May the Twelfth: Mass-Observation Day-Surveys, 1937, By Over Two Hundred Observers*, ed. H. Jennings and C. Madge (London, 1937).
35 M.O.A., 12 May Diary 2020, no. 221.
36 Mass Observation <http://www.massobs.org.uk/write-for-us/12th-may> [accessed 5 Oct. 2020].
children and families during this time of home working and home schooling. Diaries can be written in any style and can include drawings’.37

The 12th May Diary Project was not the only method through which Mass-Observation hoped to collate reflections on, and experiences of, Covid–19. Its regular panel of volunteer writers – who respond to thrice-yearly open-ended questionnaires called directives – were also asked to contribute. A week before a U.K.-wide lockdown was announced in March 2020, the Archive team wrote to its panel: ‘It is an unprecedented time and as with previous events in Mass-Observation’s history, we would like you to capture this in your writing’.38 A few gentle prompts about what might be covered were offered. It was suggested that the writers might report on their experiences of the virus, on any protective measures they were taking, on whether their shopping habits had changed, on what their favoured news sources were and on how they viewed the government response. In a reflection of Mass-Observation’s status as an emotional community, as well as a research project, the team added, ‘We are aware that for many of you the isolation will be very hard and will be thinking of you all’.39 More detailed questions followed. The Spring 2020 Directive included a ‘Covid19 (update)’ with questions on health, the government, news, home and work life, technology, shopping and food, entertainment and leisure, personal hygiene and sleep.40 ‘Have you had any interesting dreams?’ the panellists were asked, reflecting a line of questioning also evident in Mass-Observation’s mid–century manifestation.41 The Summer 2020 Directive framed questions around both Black Lives Matter and ‘Covid–19 and Time’. The latter questions focused on the rhythm and routine of the day, homelife, media and technology and the concept and experience of ‘waiting’; the former asked about the killing of George Floyd, the B.L.M. movement and the toppling of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol.42

Panel responses to these open–ended questionnaires offer scholars a way of examining the rapidly changing circumstances of 2020 as experienced in real time and across social groups. The contributors range in age from primary school children to the quite elderly; each offering distinctive perspectives on a crisis that has drawn particular attention to generational difference. A nine–year–old boy wrote:

I live with my mummy and daddy and I love music. I am half happy with the lock down and half not because I’m enjoying missing school but it is also very awkward to do social distancing. My toy monkey sometimes keeps me from going mad, which is helpful because of this crazy lockdown! I’m interested in saving the environment.43

A retired G.P. in her seventies was helping to co–ordinate shopping deliveries and relief measures for her village neighbours: ‘My next task is working with a local befriending

37 Mass Observation <http://www.massobs.org.uk/write-for-us/12th-may> [accessed 5 Oct. 2020].
38 Letter from the Mass-Observation Archive to Mass Observers, 17 March 2020 <http://www.massobs.org.uk/mass-observation-project-directives> 117. Special Directive: Coronavirus [accessed 5 Oct. 2020].
39 Letter from the Mass-Observation Archive to Mass Observers, 17 March 2020 <http://www.massobs.org.uk/mass-observation-project-directives> 117. Special Directive: Coronavirus [accessed 5 Oct. 2020].
40 Mass Observation <http://www.massobs.org.uk/images/spring_2020_directive_final.pdf> [accessed 5 Oct. 2020].
41 There are frequent references to dreams in the day diaries of 1937; a request for dream diaries in Aug. 1939, a further request for accounts of war dreams in Aug. 1940, and for a one–month war dream diary in July 1942. Dream questions were also posed in the Jan. 1949 directive (The Keep, East Sussex, Sx MOA1/3/1–13, day surveys 1937; SxMOA1/3/34, directive Aug. 1939; SxMOA1/3/43, directive Aug. 1940; SxMOA1/3/58, directive July 1942; SxMOA1/5/117 directive Jan. 1949).
42 Mass Observation <http://www.massobs.org.uk/images/Summer_Directive2020_FINAL.pdf> [accessed 5 Oct. 2020].
43 M.O.A., 12 May Diary 2020, no. 391.
service to train more volunteers to provide a telephone counselling service’. Some of those who wrote were furloughed, some had lost their jobs; many were working at home, others had no choice but to continue going out to work. Their reports will provide future historians with a source that combines experience and attitude, reportage and feeling, often with a self-consciously historicized framing. The diaries will help historians understand the meanings and significance of the events of 2020 for those who lived through it.

Mass-Observation was not, and is not, the only organization collecting experiential accounts of the pandemic of course. Perhaps more than any moment in the last fifty years, the present crisis has driven a commitment to, and plethora of, everyday record-keeping and creative record-making that transcends national borders. This is perhaps surprising given the difficulties of organizing such practices during lockdown, but collection practices have been fuelled by a sense of living through one of the folds in history, and facilitated by the shift to online living. U.K.R.I. research funding for Covid-19-related projects reflects this sense of urgency; universities, community groups, archives and museums have thrown themselves into creative online data gathering practices, with life writing a popular mode of response. Hannah Flint of The Centre for Narrative Research at the University of East London has compiled a list of those pandemic-related projects that are focused on generating and collating records of feeling, observation and experience. Some of these represent a repurposing or extension of existing activities; some are new projects that have developed in direct response to current events; some foreground particular expertise or are targeted at specific groups while others are open to all-comers.

Universities have provided one focus for the collation of Covid-19 stories. Sociologists at Edinburgh quickly established the ‘Edinburgh Decameron: Lockdown Sociology at Work Project’: ‘It is important to acknowledge and record these terrible times, to engage – both as human beings and as sociologists – with the effect of the coronavirus pandemic’. The reference here to academic identity (‘as sociologists’) and a wider identity (‘as human beings’) is interesting, speaking, perhaps, to the ways in which the crisis has exacerbated the blurring of work and non-work – conceptually, as well as temporally and spatially. The ‘Coronavirus Lost & Found Archive’ provides more evidence of this complexity. As its founder, Rebecca Adelman of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County explains, ‘I didn’t start this archive as a researcher. I created it simply because I wanted a place for people’s stories of losing and finding to live, somewhere they could be shared, housed, and publicly acknowledged’. The Archive provides a digital home for the sadness and kindness of pandemic life; allowing losses and gains of all shapes and sizes to be shared and acknowledged, grieved and celebrated.

Creativity permeates many Covid-19 projects. The Oxford Centre for Life Writing sent monthly prompts to those participating in its ‘Life-writing of Immeasurable Events’ project. These were designed to ‘open up possibilities to the imagination by encouraging

44 M.O.A., 12 May Diary 2020, no. 108.
45 Centre for Narrative Research Blog <https://centrefornarrativeresearch.wordpress.com/2020/07/07/narrative-projects-relating-to-covid-19/> [accessed 5 Oct. 2020].
46 Edinburgh Decameron: Lockdown Sociology at Work <https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/ed-decameron> [accessed 5 Oct. 2020].
47 Coronavirus Lost & Found: a Pandemic Archive <https://pandemicarchive.com/about/> [accessed 5 Oct. 2020].
48 Coronavirus Lost & Found <https://pandemicarchive.com/> [accessed 5 Oct. 2020].
people to share what they are doing, feeling, experiencing, in these strange times’. In April, for example, people were asked to ‘notice things’: ‘Little things, ordinary things, the familiar things you see and use every day. Or unexpected things … Or the absence of things … New things: vegetable boxes hastily assembled, books delivered by a neighbour and placed in quarantine beside the front door’. Some museums have mobilized life history for other forms of creativity. The ‘Letters of Constraint’ project at the National Justice Museum in Nottingham, has put individual accounts of isolation to work in the creation of an audio art work. There are also projects that have set about archiving everyday visual creativity. ‘Word on the Street’ – established by a team of design historians – has been crowd-sourcing photographs of ‘posters, illustrations and graffiti in situ’. These include, of course, the home-made rainbows and Black Lives Matter posters that adorned very many windows during lockdown. An interactive map places these ‘in-situ’ photographs in their geographical location. Others have focused on what might come next: the ‘Post-Corona Letters’ project at the University of Twente in the Netherlands asked its participants to offer their own hopes and expectations of the future.

The very different ways in which the pandemic has been experienced by individuals and groups has also inspired projects that have sought out the stories of particular communities. Examples include the International Disability Alliance’s ‘Voices of People with Disabilities During the COVID19 Outbreak’ project and U.N.E.S.C.O.’s ‘My Covid-19 Story’ youth project. And different groups, and particularly different generations, have used different formats to articulate their specific experiences, sometimes repurposing existing forums to respond to the present. TikTok has offered a particularly rich, and often acutely funny, insight into the everyday experiences of young people during the crisis; other forms of online connection – Zoom for example – have been adapted for new purposes such as family quizzes, pub nights with friends and remote tarot readings.

The history of everyday life during Covid-19 will be a history of other objects, sounds and practices too. It will be a history of masks and P.P.E., of supermarket delivery vans, and of birdsong and it will reflect on the events that gave rise to the global anti-racist marches, as well as examining the anti-lockdown protests. Historians will attend to new traditions such as, in the U.K., the Thursday evening clap for carers; and new global communities such as the surprisingly successful ‘PE with Joe Wicks’ phenomenon. They will also explore the impact of collective anxiety on individual practices – whether in the stockpiling of toilet roll, or the quest for flour and yeast. All of these will find their way into archives of Covid-19 life; a sense of loss for the apparent normality of a very recent everyday driving a desire to record an unstable present that bears little resemblance to that which we might have anticipated. As one diarist puts it: ‘I never imagined that masks, gloves and an empty high street would be the new normal in 2020, and not the hover cars of our childhood expectations’.

49 Oxford Centre for Life Writing [https://oclw.web.ox.ac.uk/immeasurable-events#:~:text=Life%2d%20Writing%20of%20Immeasurable%20Events%20(LIVE%20for%20short)%20is%20of%20the%20visible%20and%20measurable] [accessed 5 Oct. 2020].
50 Oxford Centre for Life Writing [https://oclw.web.ox.ac.uk/article/five-things] [accessed 5 Oct. 2020].
51 National Justice Museum [https://www.nationaljusticemuseum.org.uk/lettersofconstraint/] [accessed 5 Oct. 2020].
52 Word on the Street [https://www.wordonthestreetcollection.uk/] [accessed 5 Oct. 2020].
53 University of Twente, Centre for eHealth & Wellbeing Research [https://www.utwente.nl/en/bms/ehealth/research/story-lab/post-corona-letters/#will-the-world-never-be-the-same] [accessed 5 Oct. 2020].
54 International Disability Alliance [https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/content/voices-people-disabilities-during-covid19-outbreak#Linkmost]; U.N.E.S.C.O., My Covid-19 Story [https://en.unesco.org/youth/my-covid19-story] [both accessed 5 Oct. 2020].
55 M.O.A., 12 May Diary 2020, no. 106.
In the final part of this short paper I want to explore what an initial reading of some of the 12th May diaries suggests about writing histories of 2020. In particular I want to explore how the diarists themselves conceive of history and temporality in these times. My reflections are necessarily partial and U.K. focused: the question of critical distance is an important one and raises the question of when we might write the history of these times. The Mass-Observation material also raises other questions: about how we weigh macro and micro sources; about how the individual, ‘community’, the local and the national intersect; and about the role of transnational ideas, and transnational feelings, in framing global responses.

The day diaries were written as the U.K. entered its seventh week of lock down. If a sense of historical significance had spurred Mass-Observation’s curation of everyday experience in the 1930s and 1940s, the 2020 context seemed to make recording the minutiae of everyday life just as vital. As one contributor explained: ‘I am writing this under very unusual and exceptional circumstances. It may be limited in experience, but I am sure you will understand, whether you lived through it yourself, or are reading it at a later date’. In 2019, Mass-Observation had received 224 replies to its 12th May appeal. In 2020 it received over 5,000.

Many diarists were convinced that what was happening would have long-term historical significance. Not infrequently, there was a self-conscious assertion of the importance of writing about the present for an imagined audience of future historians. To a historical profession under concerted attack this does, perhaps, offer reassurance that what we do has a future. As a Glasgow woman put it: ‘I want this diary to matter to future historians of our times. I feel I speak as a mother and a world citizen. There’s so much else to say but I need to stop and work’. In this respect some of the material has a similar feel to Mass-Observation’s Second World War diaries, perhaps because those earlier diaries offer a model for life writing in difficult times.

When looking at the 12th May diaries, the sense of living through History is palpable but also elusive. A twenty-six-year-old Londoner confided that ‘It’s odd, you always feel like you’d feel the difference when something historical is happening around you, but instead normal life goes on’. The double use of ‘feel’ here is suggestive of the multiple and ambiguous meanings of the term. For a university researcher in Leeds, ‘the thing that bothers me most is a sense of living through a time of such rapid change and disruption, and feeling that I have so little of use to contribute’. And of course ‘history’ did a lot of work in 2020, whether in the harnessing of V.E. Day, the valorization of the N.H.S. or in responses to the removal of the statues of slave owners. Nonetheless ‘history’ can also be forgetful where medical catastrophes are concerned. As Nancy Bristow reminds us, individual memories of the 1918–20 influenza pandemic rapidly faded from the public sphere even if private trauma persisted.

This is why archives of the everyday will matter when we come to write histories of 2020. Such archives are messy and capacious. They resist overarching narratives while offering a sense of collective documentary. They will help us explore the questions we need to ask – did the pandemic slow or quicken existing trends, what was the long-term impact on social and economic inequality, what did it do to intimacy, to work, to politics, the economy and to culture – but they will also suggest new research questions about the
meanings and significance of this moment. While future historians will certainly want to pose the so-called ‘big questions’ about this period in time, they may find the answers to these questions in the minutiae and texture of everyday life.

What the Mass-Observation accounts do particularly well – partly because the diary form encourages it – is to ventilate understandings of temporality. The apparently distinctive experiences of time and space brought about by the pandemic underpin the urge to document the present, even as inequalities in access to both of these have been exacerbated by the crisis. ‘Only a few months ago I regarded my job as tedious and unimportant’, writes an Asda till-operator, ‘but I am now regarded as a keyworker’; ‘my life has probably remained much closer to normal than most’, explains a nurse; ‘I shower and get dressed for another day as a key worker’ records a civil servant, adding ‘today as with every other day in this previous eight weeks I worry. I worry I may get corona, I worry I may be a silent carrier. I worry’. 61 Those who were not in key worker roles and who did not have caring responsibilities found themselves experiencing time differently to those who were and did. For many, temporality had a new texture: time seemed to move both slowly and quickly providing opportunities for the kind of contemplation that was well suited to self-writing. This change in tempo was widely felt – and yet the diaries show it was unevenly experienced and framed by gender, class, age, race and health, as well as financial, family and employment status.

Mass-Observation’s explicitly historical identity also encouraged those who wrote to reflect on the speed of change and locate themselves within a past, present and future trajectory. As one man put it:

What a time to be alive! It feels like we are living in a movie ... The country has been in lock-down for seven weeks now and it is starting to get difficult. There were so many things we took for granted before. Popping down to the shops, being able to see elderly grandparents, going to see my friends. The thing I miss the most is working. Although we are working virtually, setting work for students online, I miss being in the classroom and seeing the children. It is my first year as a teacher and it is one I will never forget.62

In this short comment we move through different layers of response: the reference to living in a movie reflects an other-worldly dimension but acknowledges the cultural resources that provide narratives of understanding. The everyday detail, once taken for granted, becomes the focus of feelings of loss, as do interactions with family and friends. There is also, already, a sense of the long-term significance of this moment – ‘it is one I will never forget’.

For others thinking about the future is more obviously freighted:

Will things ever be the same? Will some world leaders kill the rest of us? Does our own have a clue? This anxiety makes it hard to relax into enjoying the next few weeks. Going forward I’d like to find a more satisfactory sense of self outside work and build on enjoying the slowness and beauty of the world around me. I like to think that some positive things will come out of this. For me and the world. Don’t know though. I really don’t.63

The snapshot of an ordinary day collected by Mass-Observation in 2020 presents a patchwork of individual feelings, perspectives and experiences, out of which future historians might construct stories of life in difficult times. They tell us what a fracturing of the rhythms of everyday life felt like, as well as what its consequences were for individuals,

61 M.O.A., 12 May Diary 2020, no. 132; M.O.A., 12 May Diary 2020, no. 407; M.O.A., 12 May Diary 2020, no. 33.
62 M.O.A., 12 May Diary 2020, no. 376.
63 M.O.A., 12 May Diary 2020, no. 58.
for families and for communities. Approached as diary entries they reveal the events of a single day; examined as slices of autobiography they tantalizingly provide much more. In this way they simultaneously offer us a heavily contextualized ‘mass-observation’ and a series of life histories, each of which shows how personal history, material structures and cultures of feeling frame subjectivities. This complexity – and the purposes that diary-writing can serve in times of turmoil – is acutely clear in the final extract that I want to present here, sent to the Archive by a thirty-three-year-old Londoner:

Today makes it 58 days since I’ve seen the face I love in front of me. I never counted the days before; It was just a given I’d see him on the weekend and we’d have a nice weekend in our bubble away from reality.

He doesn’t even know I love him; well I think he does. But we’ve never said it out loud. But we have our ways. I actually now daydream about telling him in person, because I think after all this, we should allow each other that. So if that doesn’t happen for a long time yet, I love you so much E.

I’ve had a rough few years; heartache, stress, loss and last year I even ended up in hospital. This year was meant to be the most uneventful year I ever had. I remember shouting at the sky to please grant me a year where nothing dramatic would occur. Let me get a year to just find my footing again and heal.

But it’s 2020 and this is a year where COVID-19 took root across the world.64

* 

Plague, flu and the unpredictable contours of medical historiography

Kevin Siena

Predicting the future is not historians’ strong suit, even when it applies to our own work. An ocean of possibilities – one far too complex to map at the moment – awaits those scholars who will one day write the histories of Covid-19. This claim is not meant as an excuse to avoid the task at hand. Rather, it is grounded in the history of how epidemics have been recorded and remembered. Medical history, in other words, suggests that we should keep alive to the possibility that Covid’s coming historiography may surprise us. We must take seriously even the seemingly far-fetched. I will make this case by briefly contrasting how two epidemics were handled in the century or so after they occurred.

It is well known that plague ravaged London in 1665/6, killing 100,000.65 It turned out to be effectively the disease’s swan song in England, for only a handful of cases would be noted over the next three centuries.66 How was that event remembered by subsequent generations? A little over fifty years later one can see that its memory was alive and well in texts like Daniel Defoe’s influential Journal of a Plague Year, which famously combined elements of history, journalism and the novel.67 Defoe had an audience for this work in

64 M.O.A., 12 May Diary 2020, no. 200.
65 P. Slack, The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England (Oxford, 1985); A. Lloyd Moote and D. Moote, The Great Plague: the story of London’s Most Deadly Year (Baltimore, Md., 2006).
66 As Anne Roberts reported in 1980 ‘for the 300 years since 1680 England has been substantially free of the pestilence’ (‘The plague in England’, History Today, xxx, no. 4 (1980), 29–34, at p. 34). A recent study of the Third Plague pandemic outlines in greater detail the contours of European plague outbreaks at the turn of the 20th century and largely confirms this picture, showing fewer than 100 documented cases in England (B. Bramanti and others, ‘The Third Plague Pandemic in Europe’, Proceedings of the Royal Society B – Biological Sciences, clxxxvi (2019) <doi: 10.1098/rspb.2018.2429> [accessed 10 Sept. 2020]).
67 Daniel Defoe, A Journal of the Plague Year: being observations or memorials, of the most remarkable occurrences, as well publick as private, which happened in London during the last great visitation in 1665 (London, 1722).
1722 precisely because plague raged in Marseilles at that moment and Britons remained terrified that it was about strike them again. Plague was thus both history and current event. Defoe was hardly alone in looking to the history of the London outbreak. Reprints of seventeenth-century medical texts and plague orders poured off the press in the early 1720s. Both new medical treatises and accounts of the French outbreak actively drew on the memory of the 1660s, while texts like Richard Brookes’s history of epidemics chronicling three centuries of contagion shows that the appetite for epidemic history remained powerful five decades after the great London outbreak. Indeed, Nükhet Varlık has recently made the case that the legacy of plague – and of the Marseilles epidemic in particular – had a long influence, stretching even into our own time of Covid.

As I have explored elsewhere, the history of even lesser killers like typhus remained similarly influential in the eighteenth century. Much older and smaller outbreaks of that disease were written into English history by early modern chroniclers like Ralph Holinshed and Richard Baker. As a result, when the disease broke out in a London courtroom in 1750 these stories were ready at hand for journalists who quickly pronounced that a relatively obscure Oxford outbreak – one that was almost two centuries old and which had only killed about 300 – ‘would never be forgot’. The memory of such a devastating event as 1665/6 understandably left an even greater legacy. Consider an example from the turn of the nineteenth century. When Manchester authorities sought to establish a fever hospital in the 1790s, frightened citizens tried to block it or at least keep it from being situated too near to them. Their arguments dripped with terrified memories of plague. They referred to the hospital as a ‘lazaretto’, cited medical theories about plague to highlight the danger of contagion, and even invoked plague-era quarantine legislation to make legal arguments about zoning. It bears remembering that it had been 130 years since plague had struck England. The Manchunians making these impassioned arguments were thus four generations safely removed from it. Yet the history of plague’s ravages still mattered to them.

Quite a different picture emerges if one looks to an example that was much in the news this past spring, the 1918–20 influenza pandemic. The global spread of flu in 1918 seemed to offer a particularly useful example for thinking about Covid. Unlike a disease like the Black Death, the so-called Spanish Flu struck the modern age of global transit, communication and city life, and this seemed to give it considerable value for thinking about our unfolding crisis. Moreover, influenza is a viral, respiratory disease, so its clinical manifestations and manner of contagion seemed more akin to Covid than other major

68 Thomas Willis, A preservative from the infection of the plague, or, any contagious distemper ... Written in the year 1666 (London, 1721); Nathaniel Hodges, Lomologia: or, an historical account of the plague in London in 1665: with precautionary directions against the like contagion (London, 1721); Anon., A collection of very valuable and scarce pieces relating to the last plague in the year 1665 (London, 1721).
69 John Pringle, A Rational Enquiry into the Nature of the Plague: drawn from historical remarks on those that have already happen’d (London, 1722); Anon., The late dreadful plague at Marseilles compared with that terrible Plague in London, in the year 1665 (London, 1721).
70 Richard Brookes, A History of the Most Remarkable Pestilential Distempers that have appeared in Europe for three hundred years last past (London, 1721).
71 N. Varlık, ‘Rethinking the history of plague in the time of COVID–19’, Centaurus, lxii (2020), 285–93.
72 Raphael Holinshed, The Third Volume of Chronicles, Beginning at Duke William the Norman, Commonlie called the Conqueror; and Descending by Degrees of Yeres to all the Kings and Queenes of England in their Orderlie Successions (London, 1586), pp. 1547–8; Richard Baker, A Chronicle of the Kings and Queens of England (London, 1643), ‘The Raigne of Queen Elizabeth’, p. 44.
73 K. Siena, Rotten Bodies: Class and Contagion in Eighteenth-Century Britain (New Haven, Conn., 2019), pp. 98–103.
74 Siena, Rotten Bodies, pp. 206–9. See, also, M. Delacy, Contagionism Catches On: Medical Ideology in Britain (Cham, 2017), pp. 207–41.
pandemic diseases like plague or cholera. For these reasons medical historians suddenly found themselves thrust into the spotlight in the spring of 2020, none more than experts on the 1918 flu. To take perhaps the most prominent example, Howard Markel’s 2007 study contrasting the health outcomes that resulted from different American cities’ policies during the pandemic was heavily reported upon and played a significant role in early discussions about the importance of ‘flattening the curve’. At first glance, the many news reports comparing 2020 to 1918 would seem to suggest that the memory of flu played a similar role in the century that followed it as memories of plague had for the generations that followed 1665.

However, before the spring of 2020, the 1918 flu pandemic wallowed in relative historical obscurity. I say relative because obviously it has been the focus of terrific scholarship, especially as its recent centennial approached. Nevertheless, it is telling that seven decades after the outbreak historian Alfred Crosby could title one of the foundational studies of the topic America’s Forgotten Pandemic. Crosby had originally published the book in 1976 as Epidemic and Peace, 1918. But he notably retitled it when it was reissued in 1989 to highlight his argument about national amnesia. Crosby showcased how the pandemic was largely forgotten in the twentieth century, as indicated by its wide exclusion from popular periodicals and academic textbooks for decades. Crosby’s words held up well into the early twenty-first century, because, at the risk of the anecdotal, when I mention the flu pandemic to my students each year most have never heard of it.

It is also revealing to compare influenza’s historical footprint with that left by an event from the same moment, the First World War. The Great War dwarfs the pandemic in the historical imagination, whether in terms of scholarly studies, films, novels or public memorials. Yet many more people died in the pandemic. An estimated twenty million died in the war over four years, while roughly 50–100 million died of flu in just two. Whether because flu deaths lacked the romance, drama or political importance of war deaths, or because military and political history wielded far more influence than did medical history within our profession, it is certainly instructive that the event with the far greater body count was allowed to slip quietly to a second– or third-tier position in terms of historical relevance. In a word, the pandemic became little more than a footnote to war. Does it not seem suddenly peculiar in 2020 that 50–100 million people could die in a global pandemic and that event not register as a first order historical event? For context, at the time of writing official figures indicate that fewer than one million have so far died of Covid-19.

75 H. Markel and others, ‘Nonpharmaceutical interventions implemented by US cities during the 1918–19 influenza pandemic’, JAMA, ccxcviii (2007), 644–54. In popular media, see, e.g., H. Markel, ‘What history revealed about cities that socially distanced during a pandemic’, Newshour, PBS.org, 20 Apr. 2020 <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/what-history-can-teach-us-about-flattening-the-curve> [accessed 10 Sept. 2020].

76 A sample of key works include The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918–19, ed. H. Phillips and D. Kingray (London, 2003); N. K. Bristow, American Pandemic: the Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic (Oxford, 2012); E. Jones, Influenza 1918: Disease, Death, and Struggle in Winnipeg (Toronto, 2007); M. Humphries, The Last Plague: Spanish Influenza and the Politics of Public Health in Canada (Toronto, 2013); M. Honigsbaum, A History of the Great Influenza Pandemic: Death, Panic, and Hysteria, 1890–1920 (London, 2013).

77 A. Crosby, Epidemic and Peace, 1918 (Westport, Conn., 1976); A. Crosby, America’s Forgotten Pandemic: the Influenza of 1918 (rev. edn., Cambridge, 1989).

78 Particular national histories may also matter here, for some nations, like Great Britain, lost more to the war than to the flu.

79 Johns Hopkins University, Coronavirus Resource Center shows 783,150 deaths globally at the time of writing (19 Aug. 2020). It bears stressing that such figures are very much in flux and depend heavily on different nations’ capacity for testing. This figure thus may well underrepresent total mortality. The point being made here is simply to compare the relative scope of mortality in these two events, and not – at all – to minimize the death and suffering caused by Covid <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> [accessed 10 Sept. 2020].
We can probably thank the stunning success of twentieth-century biomedicine for this example of historical amnesia. It is likely that generations of westerners raised in relative security from the worst horrors of disease felt little need to register the epidemic as a keystone historical event. As doctors rendered disease after disease toothless by inoculation or antibiotics, medical history – literally the remembering of past diseases – became something of a niche historical pastime, studied by specialists but relatively few others. Indeed, Crosby commented to this effect, noting that it was the AIDS epidemic and its ability to shake popular assumptions about biosecurity that inspired renewed interest in disease history, and that subsequent infections like SARS may have intensified popular worries: “The experts with white coats and stethoscopes still had things under control, and we would last until the degenerative maladies got us. For certain, the 1918 flu was ancient history and no more pertinent to our lives than the Sweating Sickness of Tudor England. In 2003 that confidence is shaking in its boots.”

Surely the memory of plague mattered more than the memory of flu in the centuries that followed 1665 and 1918 respectively because eighteenth-century Britons felt vulnerable to disease in ways that twentieth-century Americans simply did not.

These very different cases suggest that the manner in which Covid will be remembered and recorded remains quite up in the air. Covid certainly feels seismic, but the surprising twentieth-century disregard for Spanish Flu means that we must keep alive to all possibilities, even that the current pandemic could be neglected by future scholars. It is certainly possible that the pandemic could be overtaken by other events, prompting the question of whether Covid will be the star of its own show or merely a supporting cast member in another story: the story of Brexit-era Britain, or Trump-era America, perhaps? One factor here may be the extent to which national histories continue to frame historical investigation, or whether these continue to cede ground to transnational and global histories. It is impossible to predict Covid’s historiography because so much will depend on events that are still to come, for these will shape the world in which future historians write. Their concerns, as ever, will drive the historiography.

On that score, if I had to bet, I would predict that Covid’s history will be shot through with environmental themes, because climate crisis is sure to dominate research agendas in coming decades. As much as Covid seems poised to draw future historians towards medical history, climate crisis is likely to have an even greater impact steering scholars towards environmental history. For example, future historians may focus on the zoonotic nature of Covid to explore our relations with the biosphere, encroachment upon habitat, or reliance on factory animal farming. Or they may look to Covid in 2020 as a kind of political and cultural dry-run for environmental action.

The two crises, Covid and climate change, share key features: both are global in scope; both require collective action; both require behavioural changes at the individual and community levels alongside sweeping policy changes at the governmental level; and both are crises that require citizens and leaders to heed scientific advice. Thus, future historians may well use the Covid crisis as a window through which to gauge different countries’ political and cultural readiness to tackle climate change at this moment. These are still early days, but the picture from the United States does not inspire confidence.

If scholars do pursue that sort of inquiry and use Covid as a window to explore deeper issues, they will be keeping with long traditions within medical historiography. Epidemics put communities under stress, carving societies open so that historians can view the inner workings of their politics, economies and social relations. In an influential

---

80 Crosby, *America’s Forgotten Pandemic* (2nd edn., Cambridge, 2003), ‘Preface to the New Edition’, p. xii.
study medial historian Charles Rosenberg outlined epidemics’ value as sampling devices with unique power to reveal a ‘cross-sectional perspective … of institutional forms and cultural assumptions’. Here attention to social justice is one example of a common theme in epidemic historiography that is likely to continue to play a major role. Epidemics show vividly where power is and isn’t. Issues like class, race, religion or immigration status almost always influence not just policy but material outcomes of life and death. Current statistics indicate that Covid is not egalitarian; it is striking the poor and communities of colour at much higher rates in jurisdictions all over the world. It is hard to imagine that this will not play a central role in future histories of our pandemic.

In terms of cultural history, one of Covid’s most profound impacts may be upon those aforementioned cultural assumptions about biosecurity, such a hallmark of western culture in the long twentieth century. HIV/AIDS certainly shook the foundations, but the edifice largely held. The presumption that technological modernity armours us against epidemic scourges remained strong into the twenty-first century, a point ironically demonstrated by the rising influence of anti-vaccinationism over the last several decades. Indeed, one of the more cogent critiques of anti-vaccinationists is historical rather than scientific: namely, that with a fuller appreciation of medical history vaccine-opponents might not take contagious scourges so lightly.

Regardless, we must now presume that all of this has been blown wide open. This is not to say that people will universally embrace vaccination. To the contrary, we are very likely headed towards major cultural battles over the issue if—and—when a successful vaccine for Covid is developed. What will have changed dramatically will be citizens’ personal experience with infectious disease. The fact that twenty-first-century societies could be brought to their knees by a disease—one that experts’ best efforts to treat, prevent or even just contain have been so stymied—is certain to force a re-evaluation of peoples’ sense of biosecurity. The cultural impact of this development, which is currently unknowable but potentially profound, seems destined to give future scholars considerable work. Here, the history of vaccination may offer a few clues. Twenty-first century opposition to vaccination in the West has risen against a backdrop of remarkable security from disease. Yet the history of events like the polio vaccine campaign has demonstrated well that fears of vulnerability to infectious disease can work powerfully to bolster support for biomedical interventions. The terror of polio in the 1950s was such that hundreds of thousands of American parents eagerly volunteered their young children to test the Salk vaccine. Whatever transpires, future historians will have to work through the cultural and political implications of the reordering of the relationship between publics and science that Covid is sure to force.

Because of space constraints I will briefly make just one final point to address method. Future historians will need the ability to explore big data. Previous epidemics have produced records that will look quaint in the future: doctor’s case notes, diaries, newspapers or municipal health reports. These will continue to be utterly vital. But so, too, will new massive datasets. To take one example, cellphone data for entire national populations have been correlated with national epidemiological databases using algorithms to correlate population movements and Covid spread. Future historians will not only need to be able to work with these complex, multi-layered, historical artefacts to understand them as they were originally intended to be understood, they also will need to be adept at using advanced methodologies to mine these and other datasets to

81 C. Rosenberg, ‘What is an epidemic? AIDS in historical perspective’, Daedalus, cxviii, no. 2 (1989), 1–17, p. 2.
82 D. M. Oshinsky, Polio: an American Story (Oxford, 2005), pp. 188–213.
answer their own questions. More than that, they will also have to be able to practice something timeless and central to the history of science and medicine: epistemology. They will need to unpack these incredibly complex artefacts both to understand the processes by which the resulting scientific knowledge was produced, as well as to trace the politics that will inevitably lie embedded deeply within them. Unpacking the politics from within scientific discourses is typical stuff for historians of medicine, but in an age of big data it will become a very tall order. Thus, the more current historians can practice working with big data, familiarizing ourselves with methodologies developing in the Digital Humanities, the better equipped we will be to train our students for the significant tasks ahead.

Or maybe a vaccine will soon render Covid insignificant and we can just forget the whole thing.