

***I Survived the Unprecedented Times, and All I Got Was This Lousy T-shirt:
Beyond the Mantra of "Unprecedented Times" and the Negation of Archives***

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The last two months have seen the phrase “unprecedented times” become something of a mantra to describe the new corona-reality in which we are living (and, in which many are also dying). History will look back on the “Unprecedented Period”, with capital letters.

To call today’s period “unprecedented” obviously resonates easily and there are definitely strong elements to favour the claim. A particularly glaring “unprecedented” feature of the moment is the intersection between global pandemic, global lock-down and global-economic crisis.

Nonetheless, the term “unprecedented” is an oversimplistic and ahistorical phrase which needs unpicking further. I believe archivists (and also historians) have a responsibility to point this out, for the phrase “unprecedented”, if taken to its logical conclusion, negates the value of history and archives and records just at a moment when they, potentially, have an enormous amount to contribute.

The fact that today’s events are, in many ways, “unprecedented”, does not mean the past has nothing to teach us, and, nor does it mean that we are acting blind. An ahistorical approach that focuses purely on the present and that relies on the mantra “unprecedented” is actually the *best* way of guaranteeing that we *do* act blindly in the current situation. Over-reliance on the phrase risks having a paralyzing impact just at a moment when far-reaching and well-thought out interventions need to be, and are being, made. It also risks justifying inadequate interventions based on the perceived inevitability of lack of preparedness. There is also a risk of trivialisation. It is all too easy to imagine that when we “come through the period” (whatever that may mean), T-shirts will appear that read “I survived the Unprecedented Times, and all I got was this lousy T-shirt”.

The outcome of the pandemic, both in the immediate term and more medium term, will, at least largely, be determined by collective human activity (and inactivity), intentional or otherwise. It is vital to be able to anticipate the likely evolution of these intersecting pandemic, economic crisis and lock-down, and to develop effective strategies for intervening in this landscape, and also to evaluate the immediate interventions being made. In order to do this, it is vital to be historically informed.

Unpicking the term “unprecedented”

What does it mean to describe something as “unprecedented”? How do we even know *if* something is “unprecedented”? What are the implications if something is, indeed, “unprecedented”? And, what, if any, are the roles of archives and archivists in all of this?

Firstly, *all* moments are unprecedented, as history is a uni-directional and irreversible process. *All* history is unprecedented. I am using the phrase “history” here to mean the flow of human life over time, and the evolution of social events, relationships and structures, rather than as the academic discipline of history. Events and processes are unique, and *no* event is an *exact* repetition of a past event, no period is an exact repetition of a past period. This is despite the fact that important *similarities* may exist between events and periods at one moment in time and events and periods at another moment in time, and that important long-term cyclical social structures do exist which

result in certain repetitions and recurrent patterns. Bearing this in mind, can some events and periods be described as *more* unprecedented than other events and periods?

Secondly, the fact that certain events or periods *may* be deemed “unprecedented” does *not mean that no similarities exist* with past processes and events. Importantly, it does not mean that we cannot learn anything from the past, or that we do not need to do so. Indeed, it will *only* be possible to tell whether an event or process is in fact “unprecedented” through a detailed and rigorous scrutinizing of the past for similar occurrences, and assessing the degree of similarity or the degree of divergence between past and current occurrences.

Thirdly, the fact that certain events or periods may be deemed “unprecedented” does not mean that they simply fell from the sky, or that they had no causes or precursors, or that there is no continuity with past processes. Most events and processes, are (at least in part) the product and outcome of past events, social relations and processes. Certainly, the particular historical conditions in which the “unprecedented” events and processes occur are the product and cumulative outcome of past events and processes, even if the “unprecedented” event or process itself may represent a significant discontinuity with past trajectories, or at least appear as such. Furthermore, it is often only possible to tell if something is in fact a fundamental discontinuity only after the event, often many years, decades or even centuries afterwards.

Archives and history as weapons for understanding the present in order to intervene in the future

Archives and archivists can, and must, play a vital and unique role in thinking through these problems, as can, and must, historians. One of the key tasks of historians (understood as someone who employs historical methodology to reflect on the past, rather than someone with the professional title “historian”) is to understand processes of change over time, to understand what changes and what remains constant. One of the key tasks of archivists and archival institutions is to provide historians with the tools and materials for doing this – namely unique records which afford information and evidence of historically specific past occurrences, preserved for the long-term and made accessible.

It is useful to consider the three temporal frameworks developed [by the historian Fernand Braudel, and further developed by world-systems analysts such as Terrence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein](#) – **i)** the short term, which refers to specific events; **ii)** the medium term which refers to the slow-moving and apparently static day-to-day functioning of long-term social structures; and **iii)** the long-term in which the cumulative results of the slow-moving and apparently static day-to-day functioning of long-term social structures actually results in fundamental changes, in which existing structures gradually decline and new structures emerge to take their place.

Such an approach suggests the importance of *mining archives for information and weaponizing this information* (in the positive sense of the word), in order to make *historically informed interventions in the present which aim to influence the future*. Archives are products of events. Interpretation of archives can lead to interpretation of these events, interpretation of multiple archives may lead to the interpretation of connections (and disconnections) between different events, and interpretation of large inter-connected aggregates of records over a given time period may enable interpreting processes of historical continuity and discontinuities, thus allowing large scale and long-term social structures and processes of change to be understood. Importantly, use of records in this way may allow historians to analyse what changes and what remains constant in periods of change, to understand the similarities and the differences between the present and the past.

While some archives may simply be curiosity items about a quaint past, others may be used as informational weapons. Weapons for understanding historical trajectories in order to understand present situations so as to think through *possible* future scenarios. Importantly, some future scenarios may be more desirable and others less desirable, and historical understanding based on archival evidence can be vital for strategizing, designing and implementing interventions which are deliberately aimed at increasing the chance of the more desirable futures, while reducing the likelihood of the less desirable ones. However, this potential will only be realised to the extent that the archives are *actively and strategically* mined, and that history is put to work for the future.

Historical examples of “unprecedented” events

Archives and history are important even for “unprecedented” events, events that supposedly have no historical precedents. Before discussing coronavirus, and our current “unprecedented times”, it is worth considering some past events that were widely considered “unprecedented” when they occurred, and are still viewed largely as such by historians.

World War Two was considered unprecedented in its scale, global reach, number of deaths and injured and level of military technology deployed, as well as for its premeditated use of industrialised genocide. However, this did not mean the experience of World War One or other major wars had nothing to teach, or that protagonists in World War Two didn’t look to the archives for contemporary insights. Notably, the Nazis mined World War One archives far more extensively than the Allies did, in order to gain tactical, strategic and organisational insights. The [USA](#) and its [other allies](#) were, in fact, acutely aware that their records from World War One had not been well preserved, arranged and catalogued and were barely accessible at the moment [when they most needed them](#). Nor has the unprecedented nature of the Holocaust against Jews and Roma stopped future historians comparing the period to other genocides in history, such as the Armenian genocide in the second and third decades of the 20th century, or the centuries long process of genocide of indigenous peoples through European settlement of the Americas. The Normandy Landing in World War Two was also considered unprecedented in its scale and rapidity for moving people across water. Nonetheless, JD Bernal, one of the British government scientists involved in planning the Landing, made important use of historical archives to determine which areas of the Normandy coastline were marshlands and would not sustain the large influx of personnel and equipment.

The US-stock-market crash of 1929 was also considered unprecedented in its scale, depth and rapidity, but this did not mean that it was not important to look back at the capitalist crisis of the 1880s, or even further back in history to the tulip crisis or the South Sea Bubble of the 17th and 18th centuries. [Certainly, contemporary actors in the financial sector see the importance of reflecting on past crises for understanding the contemporary crises of the last twenty years.](#)

The Chinese and Russian revolutions were also deemed as unprecedented but this did not mean that major protagonists, such as [Vladimir Lenin did not look back and carefully analyse the Paris Commune of 1871](#), or [that Mao Tze Tung did not carefully analyse the Russian Revolution\(s\) of 1917](#), and Marx and Engels while thinking about the European revolutions of 1848 (which were also “unprecedented” that they did not carefully look back at the earlier US and French Revolutions.

Importantly, in all these “unprecedented” events, major protagonists sought to situate their current reality historically, and to understand their situation as both a continuity and discontinuity with past events and processes. It was *only* through understanding how the past had produced the current realities in a cumulative process of change, that the protagonists were able to actually understand

the discontinuities and intervene in the present in pursuit of their own goals (for better or for worse). They were not using archives and/or history as curiosities, but as weapons.

Coronavirus: unprecedented, but...there may still be insights in the archival boxes

All of the above raise a number of important questions in relation to the coronavirus and today's "Unprecedented Times".

Firstly, precision is needed when ascertaining whether or not, and if so, to what degree, the current situation actually is unprecedented. While arguably there never has been the same configuration of global pandemic, global lockdown, and global economic crisis before, there have certainly been examples in the past, and very significant examples at that, of **a)** pandemics and/or epidemics, that are both national, regional and global in scope, **b)** economic crises that are both national, regional and global in scope, **c)** lock-downs or sieges, that are for the most part more localised to specific cities or countries, but often took place within the context of wider global conflicts between states, global trade relations and other global or at least cross-border relations. There has been varying levels of intersection between these three aspects.

Numerous past examples exist.

In terms of pandemics or epidemics, this includes: Ebola in several countries in Africa in 2013-2016, SARS in 2002-2004; HIV/AIDS from the 1980s onwards the 'Spanish Flu' in 1918-19; widespread cholera outbreaks at different moments and different countries in the 19th century; the multiple and long-lasting epidemics that European settlers brought to the Americas from 1492 onwards; and, the plague in 1300s, 1600s and 1700s Europe. There were also "near misses" such as the '[Great Manchurian Plague' of 1910-1911](#) which through concerted global efforts was contained before it became a global pandemic.

In terms of global economic crises, this includes major crises in 2008, 1998, 1980s, 1956, 1929, 1921, 1880s and 1850s. Major lock-down or sieges include Stalingrad and Leningrad during World War Two, or the siege of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, not to mention more contemporary examples such as the ongoing besiegement of Gaza.

On perhaps more minor aspects of today's unprecedented situation, there have also been historical parallels, if not precedents. While Trump's defunding of WHO may come as a shock to many, an earlier US President (who, perhaps not uncoincidentally, also made overtures to white supremacy and who also presided over a resurgent US imperialism), also pulled the USA out of a multilateral institution which (also perhaps not uncoincidentally), was also headed by a black African man. This time, it was Ronald Reagan who, in 1984, [pulled the USA out of UNESCO](#) which at the time was headed by Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow from Senegal. M'Bow was the first black African to head a UN support organisation.

On a different note, it is also not new that countries have turned to blaming each other in the international arena in times of crisis, and peddling through official state organs and also state and private media outlets largely unsubstantiated accusations against each other. Concretely, Trump's, largely baseless and highly politicised verbal attacks on China are exactly the kind of communication that the now little-known 1953 [UN Convention on the International Right to Correction](#) sought to address in the arena of international law.

Another area, as trade unionists from around the world can testify, where there is plenty of historical experience is with the labelling of certain workers as "essential workers" and others as "non-essential". This is a discussion and practice which is also linked to certain services and

industries being defined as “essential services” or “essential industries.” Often, essential workers have faced extremely repressive labour legislation to compel them to work, [or denying them fundamental worker rights such as the right to strike.](#)

Another example. Trump may cause outrage by proposing that his medical team test out injecting disinfectant into the lungs of coronavirus sufferers. My first thought on hearing such a blatantly cruel, sadistic and twisted use of supposedly ‘scientific enquiry’ was raw: “definitely not unprecedented. [Dr. Mengele](#) is alive and well in the White House”.

These are just some of the major past examples. There are many others. I am not familiar enough with these particular histories to know to what extent there are meaningful parallels with today’s situation and to what extent today’s situation is completely unparalleled. Nor do I know to what extent they “offer lessons” for today, or not. However, I suspect that they would, despite the obvious major differences that exist.

Although not using the term explicitly, UNESCO has essentially recognised this need to weaponise history, via the archive, in today’s fight against coronavirus, in its statement [Turning the threat of COVID-19 into an opportunity for greater support to documentary heritage.](#) Certainly, it appears that many institutions are taking a similar approach. From the outside, it appears that WHO and various national agencies for infectious diseases and other researchers are drawing extensively on the lessons from previous epidemics and pandemics, especially [SARS](#) and [Ebola](#). Organisations such as [History Acts workshop series](#) (developed in conjunction with the Raphael Samuel History Center) have attempted to link history and contemporary issues around the coronavirus, in order to think through current interventions around mutual aid, work and data gathering related to coronavirus and the resultant crisis. Again, these are just a few examples amongst many.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it will be important to mine archives and other historical resources to anticipate possible ways in which the current situation will evolve in the next days, months and years ahead, but also in the longer term, looking several years or even decades into the future. This does not mean crystal-ball gazing, but it does mean trying to understand long-term trajectories, partly in order to anticipate what might be coming, and partly in order to intentionally intervene in order to actively and consciously shape the future.

A related, but slightly different area, is the question of contemporary records management during the crisis. This is also essential for ongoing evaluation of current interventions while they are in progress, for documenting them for the future, and for holding different actors to account for their actions (and perhaps also their lack of actions), both in the present and with hindsight in the future. This is particularly so given that many, if not most, institutions are being forced to implement decisions in a very rapid, and rapidly changing manner, which often bypasses existing decision-making protocols, and may involve hastily set-up institutions and procedures. The International Council on Archives (ICA) has issued a very important statement in this regard, [COVID-19: The duty to document does not cease in a crisis, it becomes more essential.](#)

Anticipating and intervention in the face of crisis

Anticipation is perhaps especially important in relation to thinking through how the global economic crisis will develop in the years ahead, a process which is [already proving to be devastating for many workers and communities](#), individual companies and entire economic sectors (both private and state), as well as local, regional and national level state bodies. Indeed, the crisis may prove to be much more impacting in the long-term than the coronavirus itself. There are, and will continue to be, many different so-called “knock-on” impacts of corona, which also need understanding.

These “knock-on” impacts are occurring in multiple areas including, but by no means limited to: the world-division of labour and its inter-state system; global supply chains and the production and distribution of goods, including medical equipment, medicines, food and other essential and non-essential goods and services; energy production and distribution, especially including oil and electricity; work, livelihoods, social reproduction and care work; state support and welfare mechanisms; short-term travel and longer-term migration patterns; racial and other socio-economic differentiations of lived experience and structures; social understandings of vulnerability, exclusion and marginalisation, especially including in relation to elderly, victims of domestic violence and people with special health needs; mutual aid and mass-based volunteer organisations. And, where there are major economic changes, it would be wise to consider that far reaching political changes are almost certain to follow at some point in the near future.

It will be essential to mine archive in order to attempt to anticipate developments in these areas, and how (and also where) processes of change may occur, and to think through how best to intervene in these circumstances, which few could deny are completely dire.

Importantly, I believe the economic-political and health crises need to be separated from each other. Regardless of whether an economist is neoliberal, Marxist or Keynesian, there is broad agreement that economic crises are structural and cyclical, inherent to the capitalist world-economy. Above all, each crisis is linked to the previous one, and is a cumulative outcome of social change. There can be no doubt that the current economic crisis is triggered and greatly exacerbated (in terms of its rapidity, intensity, geographical reach, sectoral reach and likely duration) by coronavirus. However, it is also related to long-term structural issues, and many economists had been arguing, prior to coronavirus, that a major crisis was brewing anyway.

The purpose of this article is not to offer extensive reflection on this crisis. Rather, what is of note here is that the cyclical and structural nature of such crises, and the fact that each successive crisis builds on the past crisis, means that this is an area where archives may offer a particularly rich field of historical information which may provide vital insights into understanding the emergence of the current crisis and, crucially, to anticipate how it *may* evolve, and how best to intervene in it.

We certainly cannot predict the future with great accuracy, but we can attempt to understand its continuities and discontinuities and make conscious choices, rather than getting steam-rolled over by the juggernaut of history. We may, of course, still get steamrolled over by the juggernaut, but perhaps it is better to do so consciously rather than unconsciously.

Conclusion: we won't know until we look in the boxes

What is certain is that we will not know what lessons may or may not exist until we look. And, the answers to the questions will largely lie in...archival boxes, and perhaps to a lesser degree, in digital platforms.

This is obviously a difficult task, above all for two reasons.

Firstly, for people “in the thick” of the pandemic, such as policy makers, health care providers, food distributors, mutual aid support groups, coronavirus patients, manufacturers of medical equipment and personal protective equipment, funeral directors and many other categories of actors, the immediacy of the situation makes it near on impossible to devote time and energy to digging around in archives to understand the historical context of today's situation.

Secondly, many, though not all, of the records from events and processes mentioned above will remain only in paper form and will not have been digitalised. Paper records are difficult, if not

impossible, to access during a global lockdown, and this may remain so for a considerable period even once lockdowns are gradually eased and so-called 'social distancing' is in place. It is to ICA's credit that already in the early days of lockdown it issued a [letter](#) announcing that despite the fact that many archival repositories had physically closed, they were working hard to make records accessible in order to inform and support health and other interventions during the pandemic. The letter is accompanied with a [world map](#) showing the locations where archives can be accessed.

A key collective task, both of individual archival institutions and the sector as a whole, will be to identify "relevant" records, to make them accessible and to put history to work in these 'unprecedented times'.