

AUTHORS:

Neil Roos¹,
Professor of History

Tinashe Nyamunda²,
Professor of History

Suraj Yengde³,
Postdoctoral Fellow

Joyline T Kufandirori⁴,
Research Associate

AFFILIATIONS:

¹Department of History,
University of the
Free State, and co-lead
implementer, Future
Professors' Programme,
Department of Higher
Education and Training

²School of Social Sciences,
North West University

³Initiative for Institutional
Anti-racism and
Accountability (IARA),
Harvard University

⁴International Studies Group,
University of the Free State

EMAILS:

RoosND@ufs.ac.za
tinashe.nyamunda@nwu.ac.za
suraj_yengde@hks.harvard.
edu
kufandirorijt@ufs.ac.za

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN HISTORY IN UNUSUAL TIMES

Initially, we envisaged that this editorial essay would focus on history-writing in the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution. In particular, we hoped to examine how that self-proclaimed moment of technological evangelism raises questions about the future of society and whether, paradoxically, the study of the past might provide a beacon, a pilot light, to navigate these unknown places. Tapping into the 1923 debates between biochemist John Burdon Sanderson Haldane and philosopher Bertrand Russell about technology and moral progress, we wanted to ask what work needs to be done to develop a novel ethic to match our technological ingenuity – and the role of history, the history of Africa, in developing this.¹ This undertaking seemed particularly germane, given how history and other critical disciplines were by-passed and disregarded by boosters of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the progressive New World that some believed it heralded.

Since the time that we began sketching the outlines for that editorial, coronavirus has arrived. Much of the world is in some form of lockdown. Professional scholars everywhere are under stress as they adjust to new work arrangements, expectations of “customer service” from many students, (inevitably) reduced budgets, and existential challenges about the labour which they undertake. For historians, these might include asking whether history-writing is an appropriate activity in times like these, unprecedented in

1 For an overview of these debates, see, CT Rubin, “Daedalus and Icarus Revisited”, *The New Atlantis. A Journal of Technology and Society* 8, 2005, pp. 73-91, accessed 19 May 2020.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150509/SJCH45.v1.1>

ISSN 0258-2422 (Print)
ISSN 2415-0509 (Online)
Southern Journal for
Contemporary History

2020 45(1):1-5

PUBLISHED:
14 July 2020

contemporary history, or whether for a while we should remain silent, conceding the field to virologists, epidemiologists, critical care experts, mathematic modellers and social scientists plotting the “social determinants of health”.² Or should the crisis of the times push historians to engage deeply in the nature of the discipline and its role in making sense not only of the past but, in the spirit of Haldane and Russell, the present and the future?

Thus, while the times have changed, the order of questions about the relevance of the discipline, the areas it investigates and the questions it poses, the methodologies it employs and its relationship to other disciplines, remain. How does the pandemic change how we make history and are our historiographies adequate? In short, what are the mooring points of the history of contemporary Africa during these times of pandemic (and after)? Moreover, does the pandemic either elucidate or complicate our use of the term “contemporary”?³

The idea of the Anthropocene- thinking about humankind as a species, with nature devastatingly striking back, seems to be an apt metaphor for thinking about society at the current historical juncture. Firstly, what if we think of the underlying unity of humankind as a species rather than concentrating as we usually do on the social distinctions of nation, class, gender, race, ethnicity and so on as we usually do? Of course, notions like colonial, post-colonial, modernity and tradition and not least of all, contemporary, all



Published by the UFS
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/ch>

© Creative Commons
With Attribution (CC-BY)



- 2 A phrase taken from the InterAcademy Partnership Call for Experts, 4 May 2020. <https://www.cognitofirms.com/InterAcademyPartnership/CallForExpertsForIAPCOVID19AdvisoryCommittee>, accessed, 5 May 2020.
- 3 For an account of the historiographic and theoretical complexities associated with periodisation and the use of the term “contemporary”, See, J Caplan, “Contemporary History: Reflections from Britain and Germany”, *History Workshop Journal* 63 (1), 2007, pp. 230-238.

remain in place, but perhaps not as significant as boundaries or as epoch-defining as often presumed. If this is the case, what does it do to adjust our angles of approach, to comb the past for signs of continuity and complicated entanglements rather than change and rupture? Acknowledging longer time frames may also make us think hard about the timing of epochs and the quantum of change that we describe. How does taking the idea of the Anthropocene as a starting point make us think of the relationship between humanity and its environments in contemporary Africa (howsoever we define this term)? The loci of such investigation should certainly not be on modernist narratives about men (and occasionally women) being masters or stewards of the environment. It should rather be on interactions and dependence. On the kinds of resources, knowledge, sources of resilience and, occasionally, hazards, that environments offer, how these are mediated by culture, tradition, class, gender, temporality and other determinants, and how these interactions, in turn, shape the primary focus of history, namely, social relations.⁴ Indeed, one of the essays that we publish in this issue ranges around these particular questions.

Anthropocene thinking also draws us to reflect on local, regional, continental and global aspects of inequality and the tipping point when nature strikes back, especially in the global South. When a species is on the backfoot – through pandemic, natural disaster or Malthusian pressures of overpopulation – what fractures and fissures are opened, what anxieties exposed around states, race, migrants, religious minorities, the poor, the rich and also the movement of “migrant toxins”?

Across the continent, we see resilience in the face of pandemic-induced lockdowns, unequal access to healthcare and, in more than one case, increasingly intrusive and violent states. In African history, particularly southern African studies, we have a strong tradition of resistance, of defiance. But much less on more subtle, everyday forms of coping and resilience. In light of the rise of new histories of effect and disposition, perhaps these themes warrant greater scrutiny. Anthropologists and psychologists have been far more attentive than historians to resilience and the kind of dispositions that accrete around it. Still, as William H. Sewell reminds us, historians are uniquely situated by the discipline to account for them in frameworks of context and timing.⁵ As historians of the South (and in most cases, committed politically and historiographically to the concept of a global South), perhaps we can take on the very idea of “resilience”. More specifically, explore how this idea may

4 See, for instance, P Joyce, “What is the Social in Social History?”, *Past and Present* 206 (1), 2010, pp. 213-248.

5 WH Sewell, *The Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 1-21.

be freed from its location in western frameworks, especially psychology, and ask how it may be invested with multiple Southern sensibilities.

Representation and truth have become standard themes in historiographies of Africa since the 1990s – indeed the first research essay in this issue occupies precisely this terrain. Movement and migration have also become major themes. Would not be salient to track and analyse the spread of ideas about the virus, about fake news – “pandemics of misinformation”- and also conspiracies, how and where they emerge and what they reveal.

Histories of medicine and healing, notably those that pose questions and draw on methodologies at the intersection of several disciplines will be invested with new significance and hopefully, additional funding. But what the pandemic and the performance of many public figures across the continent has demonstrated is that if historians write about events like the current pandemic, they need to bring a far more comprehensive understanding of deep science to their accounts than is currently the case. Those working in the broad field of neuroscience offer one example of how to draw the findings and insights of highly specialised chemistry and medical research into the realm of social analysis. If we are to avoid the misdirection of fake news and protect our disciplinary integrity by doing all we can to ensure that our work does not become a bludgeon in the hands of populists, then we must do the same.

In common with almost any social crisis, the covid-19 pandemic has already witnessed new waves of spirituality and new iterations of faith-based healing-much of these online. As historians we are uniquely positioned to ask questions about timing and form. Notably how, and whether, these are different to other, earlier waves, and what they tell us about Africa, or more particularly, parts of Africa, in a neoliberal world (itself imposed unevenly and differentially) at a time of pandemic. As with other areas of enquiry, the value of interdisciplinary approaches hardly needs emphasis.

These are all broad historical questions prompted by the arrival of the pandemic. How are protective masks changing representations of femininity and beauty in different parts of Africa?⁶ What are the consequences of online university learning for indices of (in)equality in societies across the continent where this adaption has taken place; for students mobilising and organising; and for poorer and rural students gaining access to formal economies? The list is endless, and ultimately as rangy as the imagination and inquisitiveness of the historians who venture to make sense of the past, the present and the future in these strange times. But the point is, we would be slack and smug in

6 LL Atanga, “Beauty in Confinement: how protective masks are changing femininity”, *Corona Times*, 20 May 2020, <https://www.coronatimes.net/>, accessed 20 May 2020.

a false sense of disciplinary certainty if we could assume that we could go on producing history as if we are not living through a global pandemic.

Ordinary people across the continent are being obliged to undertake complex negotiations every day in the face of the pandemic. They must make sense of complex regulations, contradictory policy statements, fake news, fake cures, rumours; care for children at home; fret over livelihoods lost; contend with security forces sometimes unseemingly eager to handle people roughly; and not least, secure food, water and shelter. From these tableaux, a banner may rise. One that rallies historians back to the study of ordinary people and everyday lives, a turn advocated by the *Southern Journal for Contemporary History* since its re-launch in 2019. This approach, we believe, could yield histories that are truly *Southern*. It could strengthen the arm of Africanist historians to write of the courage, resilience, resourcefulness and sheer grit on the part of ordinary people in contemporary Africa. It could stiffen their spine to write of the shades of surveillance and authoritarianism entering public life (as they often do) in the name of public health. Could this be what a new insurgency in African historical writing, emerging from the time of the pandemic, looks like?

In February 1917, the History Department at a Moscow university stopped regular classes in order to critically document and record the events of the liberal revolution in Russia. The professors and postgraduates were there right up until the Bolshevik revolution, and they left one of the most valuable archives imaginable of the travails of liberal government in revolutionary times. We live in similarly extraordinary times, with the whiff of change, unpredictable yet substantial, in the air. It behoves us a community of historians to behave more like ethnographers, not only of everyday lives but of governments, the arts, health, financial and ecological systems. Like the historians of 1917, should we not bring our historical sensibilities and training to our society in the here and now? Using the particular disciplinary strengths of history, could we not draw from the insights and methodologies of other disciplines, including deep science, to understand that sliver of African society that dies from the pandemic, that which survives (and maybe thrives) and the geopolitical, human, economic and cultural relations that emerge from it?