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**Yuval Noah Harari. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*.
New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015**

Reviewed by Joseph Drew

Since 1967 I have spent many summers on a kibbutz, a collective farm, in Israel. When I was there five years ago, one of the kibbutzniks, an agricultural scientist with a PhD from Oregon State University, recommended I read the writings of Prof. Yuval Noah Harari of Hebrew University. I didn't. What a mistake. Today, Harari's book entitled "Sapiens," as translated from the original Hebrew into English, has been residing on or near the top of the New York Times best-seller list for many weeks.

Sapiens provides a wide-ranging and thought-provoking introduction for students of comparative civilization; it describes the rise and journey of mankind, ending with speculation about the future of the species. The work is divided into four parts — the Cognitive Revolution, the Agricultural Revolution, the Unification of Humankind and the Scientific Revolution.

The first chapter presents a brief review of the evolution of mankind. Our genus, *Homo*, began about 2.5 million years ago, with sequential pulses out of Africa, our birthplace, beginning about two million years ago. The nomenclature and classification schemes for evolution seem to change with each generation of scholars. Today we can say that from the hominid family came various subfamilies. Our subfamily is called the Hominines, within which are two tribes, the panins and the hominins; species anywhere on the main human clade, or line, are generally called hominins.

There is one subtribe of the hominins that includes early predecessors of ours no longer surviving, such as the Australopithecine and Kenyanthropus; we fall in the other subtribe, called Hominina or hominans. We, as *Homo sapiens*, are the sole remaining version of our subtribe, having outlasted other forms of *Homo* such as *H. habilis*, *H. erectus*, and *H. neanderthalensis*. (See Bernard Wood's *Human Evolution: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.) Harari observes that although we live today, and others in the *Homo* line do not, *Homo erectus*, "upright man," survived for two million years, far longer than we have to date.

Physically, anatomically modern man evolved about 150,000 years ago. We have large brains, more than double the size of early men, but, writes Harari, "a jumbo brain is a jumbo drain on the body." There are other unique features to our bodies, including that we are born too early, before all our vital systems are developed. Thus, mankind needs to take care of our young. "It takes a tribe to raise a human" and evolution has favored those capable of forming strong social ties. Obtaining fire enabled the rise of humanity, too; we can cook food that we cannot digest in natural forms – wheat, rice and potatoes, for example. By cooking, we also destroyed dangerous germs and parasites in the food.

Harari discusses the methods by which *Homo sapiens* spread across the globe (leaving Africa roughly 70,000 years ago), outlasted other humans already present, and used language to rise to supremacy among all other creatures. It was the Cognitive Revolution, about 70,000 to 30,000 years ago, that led to our present ways of thinking and communicating. Why communicate? He thinks that a major reason was the human need to gossip. And a major result of our ability to imagine via words led to the ability to change behavior rapidly, to evolve culturally. The Cognitive Revolution led to our ability to plan, to form larger groups, and to bring about both cooperation amongst strangers and innovative social behavioral patterns. Thus arose the hunting and gathering bands.

Was it a bad life? Hunters and gatherers enjoyed a more comfortable and rewarding lifestyle than most peasants and workers who have followed them over the years. Interestingly, Harari cites new evidence that the size of the average human brain has decreased since the age of foraging. Moreover, hunters and gatherers were not dependent on one single source of food, so they could make up for losses. These individuals were taller and healthier than the peasants that followed them, suffered less from infectious diseases, and they worked fewer hours than modern people. Further, those who could avoid dying in the first few years of life might anticipate living into their sixties, seventies, and eighties.

Among the major achievements of early man that he cites was the colonization of Australia 45,000 years ago, but this led to the extinction of many native animals. He gives other examples of the elimination of fauna whenever humans arrive, including in the Americas. The conclusion: “the historical record makes *Homo sapiens* look like an ecological serial killer.” We are, says Harari, “the deadliest species in the annals of biology.”

In the section on the Agricultural Revolution the argument is made that it occurred in various places around the world, not simply in the Fertile Crescent, where it happened roughly 10,000 years ago. It was “one of the most controversial events in history.” Moreover, it was “history’s biggest fraud” because the average farmer had a worse life than the average hunter gatherer, “a trap.” And, says the author, with the Agricultural Revolution mankind didn’t domesticate wheat; it domesticated us; he means that we were the ones forced into houses, who got a worse diet, achieved little economic security, and experienced an inability to move when things went bad, while wheat expanded worldwide. Ten thousand years ago, wheat was “just a wild grass, one of many, confined to a small range in the Middle East. Suddenly, within just a few short millennia it was growing all over the world.” It had become one of the most successful plants in the history of the earth, he writes, thanks to our efforts.

With the Agricultural Revolution, writes Harari, the population grew; this meant that farmers had to work harder to feed the increased population. “Population growth burned humanity’s boats.” Further, today’s luxuries become tomorrow’s necessities, so new obligations are created.

However, Harari says, the Agricultural Revolution was a turning point, where many say that “Sapiens cast off its intimate symbiosis with nature and sprinted towards greed and alienation.” Harari reports that the population exploded, rising from about 5 million before the Agricultural Revolution to more than 250 million by the first century CE.

Settling down as farmers meant that mankind now would plan, think for the future, something hunters and gatherers generally didn’t do. New “imagined” social order arises, with social stratification, urbanization, government, and civilizations as products of the Agricultural Revolution. In addition to objective facts, subjective views emerge — including myths which assume the status of objective facts for most people. Myths arise as necessary to sustain society — myths including beliefs in inequality (Hammurabi) or equality (the U.S. Declaration of Independence) and often resting on “true believers.”

Harari lauds the invention by ancient Sumerians of writing. This has enabled modern progress and exists itself as what Emile Durkheim would call a social fact; it cannot be reduced to the individual level but is social *sui generis*. Writing enables numbers and arguments and facts to be passed on generation to generation.

In this section, Harari has essentially written a comparative study of civilizations. He tells of how different writing systems developed, how great texts began in oral form, and how bureaucracy arose. He points to the widespread belief in the “fiction” of social stratification and discrimination of all sorts, how the social concepts of man and woman arose (as distinguished from the biological existence of males and females) and what their implications have been, and what large questions about the organization of society remain open.

The third part of the book Harari calls the Unification of Humankind. He begins by arguing that history is moving in a direction: mega-cultures have led to the unity of humanity. He labels early civilizations as “worlds” separated from the others. Then, he argues, commerce, empires and universal religion spread everywhere. Result: We now have a single global culture, probably, he writes, the inevitable result of the dynamics of human history.

First: Commerce triumphs. Money, he writes, is the most universal and most efficient system of mutual trust ever devised. We might hate our enemy, but we take his money.

Second: Empires, while frequently despised, have in fact unified countries and help bring about a common culture; in the future, we will be seeing the erosion of nationalism and the emergence of a global empire. Global standards of financial behavior, environmental policy and justice are emerging, and individual countries simply can't stop climate change single-handedly.

Third: Religion is the third great unifier of mankind. Harari discusses the rise of polytheism, monotheism, dualism, natural law religions (such as Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, and Stoicism), and modern manifestations of humanism, capitalism, socialism and other forms of religion.

Why has history developed as it has? Harari rejects deterministic arguments based on economics, biology, geography or ecology. We can figure out "how" history happens but not "why" certain forks in the road were taken; I would have alluded to Max Weber here. Harari writes: "Unlike physics or economics, history is not a means for making accurate predictions." Further, there is no proof that history is working for the benefit of humanity, he says.

In Part IV Harari covers the Scientific Revolution, noting the vast changes this revolution has brought to the life of mankind, including a growth in numbers from 500 million to 7 billion of us. The author examines the rise of science, the great breakthroughs, and the fact that science is typically in the service of some goal. He argues that history's "chief engine" for the past 500 years has probably been the "feedback loop" between science, empire, and capital.

Thus, a British ship bound for the Southern Pacific to study the transit of Venus across the face of the sun did that study but also led to geographic discoveries which brought on British conquest of much of Oceania and Australia and the concomitant deaths of most of the original residents the British encountered.

Europe beat out Asia and Africa in this expansion, the author argues, because it accepted the tenets of science and could harness technology to significant ends; further, rapacious capitalism drove the tremendous success of Europe (much as Marx argued in *The Communist Manifesto*).

In an interesting section, the author ponders why the great Chinese admiral Zheng He with his huge armada (far more powerful than Columbus's) and his gigantic voyages, undertaken in the early fifteenth century, did not make a lasting impact such as the Europeans did only a few decades later. Why did China not take control of Indonesia, India, Arabia, and East Africa? The answer: the Chinese under Zheng He and the later Europeans both were explorers; only the Europeans sought to conquer and rule, as well. The Chinese were interested in local matters, goings-on at home only, not in expansion to new found lands they could have ruled.

Not all of what European expansionism achieved was harmful.

- Harari tells the story of how the British, once ensconced in India, were able to uncover Mohenjo-Daro, and thus find out about that early Indian civilization of which Indians themselves were unaware.
- He describes how the British were able to decipher the long unused writing system of cuneiform, thus bringing to modern men the 3,000-years-long ancient life of the Middle Eastern Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian cultures.
- He talks about how William Jones, the great founder of the Calcutta-based Asiatic Society, was able to study Sanskrit in depth and then come up with the concept of the existence of the Indo-European language family.

Finally, money. Harari describes the idea behind capitalism — it's based on faith in the future and coupled with the argument that those who make profits will reinvest their profits in the business, growing it. Capitalism, he says, rests on the existence of capital (money, goods and resources invested in production) not wealth, wasted on unproductive activities. The principal tenet of capitalism is that economic growth is the supreme good; justice, freedom and happiness all depend on economic growth. Example: within 80 years the relatively small swampland called Holland, owned by Spain, gained its independence and grew to be the richest country in Europe; how? Credit and capitalism.

Capital has driven European expansionism over the past few centuries and capitalism has been closely related to empire-building, as European countries stepped in militarily to advance the interests of their investors. The Opium War was a perfect example, as was the British takeover of Egypt and the English fight against the Ottomans on behalf of Greek independence — all intended to protect their countrymen's financial interests. Especially egregious was the murder — driven by greed for profits in the rubber industry — of up to ten million people in the Congo by Belgians between 1885 and 1908.

Harari sums up: "Some religions, such as Christianity and Nazism, have killed millions out of burning hatred. Capitalism has killed millions out of cold indifference coupled with greed." He writes that consumerism is a result of capitalism; so, too, is the vicious, insensitive mistreatment of animals whose products (such as milk and meat) we utilize. Environmental destruction also is a result of rapacious capitalism.

With the Industrial Revolution has come standardized time, urbanization, the disappearance of the peasantry, democratization, and the collapse of the family and one's local community (now replaced by the state and the market). From our status as members of a family and a community, we have become alienated individuals. This parallels the arguments of Henry Sumner Maine and Ferdinand Toennies, among others.

In one fascinating discussion, Harari points out that war has greatly diminished in recent decades. Most people cannot imagine real war interrupting their lives these days, as opposed to the situation for much of history. Countries with borders generally see those borders respected by neighboring countries; Iraq's attempt to gobble up Kuwait in 1990 was a rare exception. Empires have fallen peacefully in the period following World War II — particularly the Soviet Union. Most of the final stages of the British and French empires were generally peaceful.

Thus, peace has become the rule, rather than the exception, according to the author. The atomic bomb makes any major war a suicide pact. Moreover, the profits of war have declined, since a country's wealth these days is in the minds and abilities of the scientists, engineers, and artists — not in minerals found underground or animals in the fields, easy to loot. Trade increases the profits of peace, and most of today's international elite are interested in peace rather than war.

He writes that: “As far as we can tell, from a purely scientific viewpoint, human life has absolutely no meaning. Humans are the outcome of blind evolutionary processes that operate without goal or purpose.” Thus, any meaning that people ascribe to their lives is just a delusion. He also writes that studying the rise and fall of empires, or the discovery and spread of technologies, says nothing about how all this influences the happiness and suffering of individuals. Are we *Homo sapiens* happier today than in the past? This is the biggest gap in our studying of history, one that we should start to address, he says.

We are probably coming to the end of our species as we now exist. It looks like the pace of technological development will soon lead to the replacement of *Homo sapiens* by completely or partially different beings, ones who possess not only different physiques but also very different cognitive and emotional worlds. Harari talks of great medical advances and the change from what we are now to cyborgs, with some parts of us replaceable as they wear out, enhanced human abilities, and the elimination of certain diseases as fatal to us.

But, will a brain reproduced inside a computer be a person? If it is your brain copied, is it you in that machine? What about consciousness?

Perhaps soon, all extant concepts that give meaning to the world will be challenged as irrelevant. Anything happening beyond that point of evolution will be meaningless to us, according to Harari. But, he writes, the future is unknown, and we cannot predict whether these forecasted changes will occur as anticipated today. So, we need to consider that the next stage of history may well include not only technological and organizational transformations but also fundamental alterations in human consciousness.

Overall, this is a wide-ranging review of the rise, triumphs, failures, and likely end of our genus. The book excites the imagination and it certainly highlights the importance and wide expanse of the social sciences, and, not coincidentally, the comparative study of civilizations, for all readers.