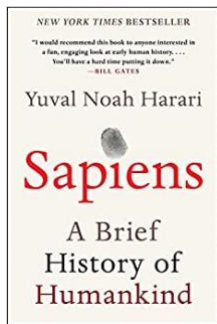


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Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind

By Yuval Noah Harari

Discussion Highlights

Presented by Tommy Zarembka

Three important revolutions shaped the course of history:

- Cognitive Revolution: kick-started history about 70,000 years ago
- Agricultural Revolution: sped it up about 12,000 years ago
- Scientific Revolution: got under way only 500 years ago

The book tells the story of how these three revolutions have affected humans and their fellow organisms.

These revolutions have empowered humans to do something no other form of life has done, which is to create and connect around ideas that do not physically exist (think religion, capitalism, and politics). These shared "myths" have enabled humans to take over the globe and have put humankind on the verge of overcoming the forces of natural selection.

Cognitive Revolution

The most important thing to know about prehistoric humans is that they were insignificant animals with no more impact on their environment than gorillas, fireflies, or jellyfish.

There used to be many other species of this genus besides homo sapiens. Human populations evolved in different directions. For example, homo erectus lived close to 2 million years. From about 2 million years ago until around 10,000 years ago, the world was home, at one and the same time, to several human species.

Homo sapiens have bigger brains than most animals, use of tools, complex social structures, yet they remained weak and marginal for a full 2 million years. Position was solidly in the middle.

What changed so they jumped to the top?

- Homo sapiens conquered the world thanks above all to its unique language.

New ways of thinking and communicating between 70,000 to 30,000 years ago constitutes the Cognitive Revolution.

Tree of knowledge mutation: Accidental genetic mutation enabled them to think in unprecedented ways and to communicate using altogether new type of language.

Our unique language evolved as a means to share information about the world.

Our language evolved as a way of gossiping. No other animal has the ability to gossip effectively.

The ability to speak about fictions is the most unique feature of Sapiens language.

Any large-scale human cooperation is rooted in common myths that exist only in people's collective imagination.

Fiction allows large number of strangers to cooperate successfully by believing in common myths.

Ever since the Cognitive Revolution Sapiens have been living in a dual reality:

- Objective reality of rivers, trees, and lions
- Imagined reality of gods, nations, and corporations

The hunter-gather world shaped us and the world that we subconsciously still inhabit.

“The average person lived many months without seeing or hearing a human from outside of her own band, and she encountered throughout her life no more than a few hundred humans.”

The average forager had wider, deeper, and more varied knowledge of her immediate surroundings than most of her modern descendants.

1. Trace the water you drink from precipitation to tap.
2. How many days til the moon is full? (Slack of 2 days allowed.)
3. What soil series are you standing on ?
4. What was the total rainfall in your area last year (July-June)? (Slack: 1 inch for every 20 inches.)
5. When was the last time a fire burned in your area?
6. What were the primary subsistence techniques of the culture that lived in your area before you?
7. Name 5 edible plants in your region and their season(s) of availability.
8. From what direction do winter storms generally come in your region?
9. Where does your garbage go?
10. How long is the growing season where you live?
11. On what day of the year are the shadows the shortest where you live?
12. When do the deer rut in your region, and when are the young born?
13. Name five grasses in your area. Are any of them native?
14. Name five resident and five migratory birds in your area.
15. What is the land use history of where you live?
16. What primary ecological event/process influenced the land form where you live? (Bonus special: what's the evidence?)
17. What species have become extinct in your area?
18. What are the major plant associations in your region?
19. From where you're reading this, point north.
20. What spring wildflower is consistently among the first to bloom where you live?

“The romantic contrast between modern industry that “destroys nature” and our ancestors who “lived in harmony with nature” is groundless. Long before the Industrial Revolution, Homo sapiens held the record among all organisms for driving the most plant and animal species to their extinctions. We have the dubious distinction of being the deadliest species in the annals of life.”

In the modern world, extinctions are a widespread issue. However, this is not purely a modern phenomenon. Instead, the development of hunting techniques in Homo Sapiens led to a trail of extinctions. Just 50,000 years ago, Homo Sapiens would have inhabited the same land as 20-foot tall Sloths and Armadillos the size of cars. However, within a couple of thousand years of Homo Sapiens' existence the vast majority of these animals had been pushed to extinction. 23 out of 24 species larger than 50 Kg became extinct within a few thousand years of Homo Sapiens travelling to Australia. The marsupials, mammals with baby-carrying pouches, failed to adapt to the onslaught of the humans. Similarly, in America, Mammoths, Mastodons, and many other native animals faltered under the influence of Homo Sapiens' pressure. The same story has been repeated wherever Homo Sapiens go.

There have been three main extinctions related to Homo Sapiens' development. First wave extinction occurred when Homo Sapiens were hunter-gatherers, and they first entered new ecosystems. The second wave extinction occurred when Homo Sapiens became farmers. Farming was associated with the burning of forests and grasslands to grow crops. Finally, the third wave extinction is the Industrial Revolution.

Agricultural Revolution

History's Biggest Fraud: Rather than heralding a new era of easy living, the Agricultural Revolution left farmers with lives generally more difficult and less satisfying than those of foragers.

Plants domesticated Sapiens, rather than vice versa.

The essence of the Agricultural Revolution: the ability to keep more people alive under worse conditions.

Humanity's search for an easier life released immense forces of change that transformed the world in ways nobody envisioned or wanted.

The discrepancy between evolutionary success and individual suffering is perhaps the most important lesson drawn from the Agricultural Revolution.

A dramatic increase in the collective power and ostensible success of our species went hand in hand with much individual suffering.

Hunt-gathers made few deliberate changes to land while farmers lived in artificial human islands that they laboriously carved out of the surrounding wilds.

The Agricultural Revolution expanded time. Farmers sailed in their imagination years and decades into the future.

Imagined orders: based neither on ingrained instincts nor on personal acquaintances but rather on belief in shared myths.

Declaration of Independence still serves as a cooperation manual.

An imagined order is always in danger of collapse, because it depends upon myths, and myths vanish once people stop believing in them.

Armies, police forces, courts, and prisons are ceaselessly at work forcing people to act in accordance with the imagined order.

Never admit that the order is imagined. Three ways to make this happen:

- The imagined order is embedded in the material world. Individual rooms vs. palace.
- The imagined order shapes our desires. Vacations.
- The imagined order is inter-subjective.

Myths and fictions accustomed people, nearly from the moment of birth, to think in certain ways, to behave in accordance with certain standards, to want certain things, and to observe certain rules. This network of artificial instincts is called culture.

Cultures are constantly trying to reconcile contradictions and this process fuels change.

The Unification of Humankind

Today almost all humans share the same geopolitical system. Three universal orders are responsible for this:

- The monetary order
- The imperial order
- Universal religions order

The Monetary Order

Hunter-gathers had no money. Each band was economically independent.

An economy of favors and obligations doesn't work when large number of strangers try to cooperate.

Money was a purely mental revolution.

Money is anything that people are willing to use in order to represent systemically the value of the other things for the purchase of exchanging goods and services.

Money enables people to compare quickly and easily the value of different commodities, easily exchange one thing for another and to store wealth conveniently.

Money is thus a universal medium of exchange that enables people to convert almost everything into almost anything else.

Money isn't a material reality—it is a psychology construct.

Trust is the raw material from which all types of money are minted. They trust the figments of the collective imagination.

Money is the most universal and most efficient system of mutual trust ever devised.

Religion asks us to believe in something, money asks us to believe that other people believe in something.

The Imperial Order

Empire has two characteristics:

- Rule over a significant number of distinct people, each possessing a different cultural identity and a separate territory.
- Flexible borders and a potential unlimited appetite.

Empire has been the world's most common form of political organization for the last 2,500 years.

Empires were one of the main reasons for the drastic reduction in human diversity. Today most of us speak, think, and dream in imperial languages that were forced upon our ancestors by sword.

It is difficult to rule an empire in which every little district has its own set of laws, its own form of writing, its own language, and its own money. Standardization was a boon to emperors.

The global empire today is ruled by a multi-ethnic elite and is held together by a common culture and common interests.

Universal Religion

Religion is a system of human norms and values that is founded on a belief in a superhuman order.

The critical historical role of religion has been to give superhuman legitimacy to the fragile imagined social orders and hierarchies.

Most of ancient religions were local and exclusive.

The Agricultural Revolution was accompanied by a religious revolution.

Increasing saw the world as a reflection of the relationship between gods and humans and our sins and good deeds determined the fate of the entire ecosystem.

Universal religion not only exalted the status of the gods but also that of humankind.

The Scientific Revolution

The last 500 years has been phenomenal growth in human power.

Until about AD 1500, aim was to preserve existing capabilities rather than acquire new ones.

Human cultures did not believe in progress.

Took 600 years after the invention of gunpowder to find its way to the battlefield.

The great discovery that launched the Scientific Revolution was the discovery that humans do not know the answers to the most important questions.

Willingness to admit this has made modern science more dynamic, supple, and inquisitive than any previous tradition.

Instead of studying old traditions, emphasis is now placed on new observations and experiments.

Scientific research can flourish only in alliance with some religion or ideology. The feedback loop between science, empire and capital is history's chief engine for the last 500 years.

Conquest of knowledge and conquest of territory became tightly intertwined.

The discovery of America was the foundational event of the Scientific Revolution

The Capitalist Creed: growth. Profits ought to be reinvested in production.

Entire enterprise is founded on trust in an imaginary future.

The idea of progress is built on the notion that if we admit our ignorance and invest resources in research, things can improve.

Progress convinced people to put more and more trust in the future.

Capitalism gradually became far more than just an economic doctrine. It is now a set of teachings about how people should behave, educate their children, and even think.

The modern capitalist economy must constantly increase production if it is to survive.

Emphasis moved away from family and community and towards the individual. The state and the market are the mother and father of the individual.

Millions of years of evolution have designed us to live and think as community members. Within two centuries we have become alienated individuals.

Imagined communities: community of people who don't really know each other but imagine that they do.

Though scientific discovery and technological innovation, the Scientific Revolution has empowered **Sapiens** to transform their environment and themselves, giving them superhuman powers and practically limitless energy. The Scientific Revolution has seen mythical stories replaced by falsifiable theories, certainties replaced by uncertainty, conservatism replaced by curiosity, and perhaps most importantly, words replaced by numbers. But are we any happier?

The story of **Sapiens** is coming to an end (in the next century or so), as the species has outgrown its hominid self. Through science and technology, they have the power and intelligence to become gods and create new artificial life and recreate themselves. Sapiens are the new gods of 'Intelligent Design' – they are **Homo Deus**. Their future is not human, it is **transhuman** as they transition into something new. If they do not destroy themselves first. The problem with Sapiens is that despite their power, they do not know what they want. They do not even know what they want to want. Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who don't know what they want?

1. **Myth-Makers.** The big idea in **Sapiens** is the thing that sets **Sapiens** apart from other species. And that difference is that **Sapiens** are myth-makers; they use imagination and language to create and communicate new worlds, alternatives and possibilities. The importance of shared myths is that they allow **Sapiens** to cooperate, organize at scale, and dominate the world. Without myths, there is no glue to bind **Sapiens** together. At an individual level, humans might be **memory-makers**, but as a species-level they are **myth-makers**. The genetic mutation that

allowed the cognitive powers of speech and imagination to emerge some 70,000 years ago is what Harari calls the *Cognitive Revolution*.

2. **Intersubjectivity Rules.** The source of human insight is not objective fact nor subjective impression, it lies in 'intersubjective' myths – our shared subjectivity. Powerful intersubjective myths include laws, gods, money, morals, patriarchy, and nations that exist neither in the natural world, nor only in unshared imaginations, but in shared intersubjectivity. Understanding humans is not about understanding their differences, it's about understanding the intersubjective myths they share.
3. **Brands are Powerful Intersubjective Myths.** Peugeot (Harari's example) is an example of an intersubjective. It doesn't exist in the natural world (you could kill all Peugeot people, buildings and products, and Peugeot would still exist). Instead, Peugeot exists as a shared myth or 'fiction' in our intersubjective imagination that is powerful because it has the power to move humans to produce and consume at scale.
4. **Fictions, Not Facts Explain.** The myths *Sapiens* share define who they are and what they do. Take money, a most powerful shared fiction. Dollar bills are meaningless tokens without the 'shared fiction' that they have value. Endowed with shared meaning, money becomes a unit of exchange, peace of mind, and the measure of our choices. And importantly, it explains behavior. (For Harari money is also "the apogee of human tolerance" because it is more open-minded than any other shared fiction (language, laws, cultural codes, or religious beliefs) because it does not discriminate on the grounds of ethnicity, religion, age, or sexual orientation.)
5. **Change the Myth, Change the World.** The intersubjective myths that both bind *Sapiens* together and break them apart is the glue that holds culture together. Break the myth and you break the world, leading to dramatic and rapid social change. Break the myth of monarchy, slavery, patriarchy, and you change the pattern of history.
6. **Biology Enables, Culture Forbids.** Just as there is nothing so natural as chemicals (they exist in the natural world), anything *Sapiens* can do is, by definition, natural. Biology opens doors, and it is culture that closes them by proscribing certain behaviors and labelling them as unnatural. The study of human culture is largely the study of what we prohibit.

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