

REVIEW OF *21 LESSONS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY*

There's a lot of food for thought in this book. My review will be a bit fragmentary—I'm stitching it together from notes I took last year.

1. Economics

The first step is to tone down the prophecies of doom and switch from panic mode to bewilderment. Panic is a form of hubris. It comes from the smug feeling that one knows exactly where the world is heading: down. Bewilderment is more humble and therefore more clear-sighted.¹

I appreciated that reminder, because one of the main focuses of the book is a problem that's currently inspiring a great deal of anxiety in me:

The technological revolution might soon push billions of humans out of the job market and create a massive new "useless class," leading to social and political upheavals that no existing ideology knows how to handle.²

Harari worries that advances in AI and biotech could make a lot of people economically superfluous. He knows this isn't what happened in previous tech revolutions, but warns "there are good reasons to think that this time is different."³ (I agree.) He also points out a couple interesting risks we may face *even if* the new tech continues to create lots of new jobs:

- They may be very high-skill jobs that low-skilled workers cannot retrain for fast enough: "We might actually get the worst of both worlds, suffering simultaneously from high unemployment and a shortage of skilled labor."⁴
- The need to retrain for new professions again and again each time your previous profession is automated away may happen with increasing rapidity, until the pace is too stressful for human psychology to handle.

¹ Yuval N. Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, First edition (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2018), 37.

² Ibid., 38.

³ Ibid., 39.

⁴ Ibid., 51.

The spectre of a “useless class” is especially alarming because once it comes into existence, its members may be permanently powerless:

Twentieth-century communism assumed that the working class was vital for the economy, and communist thinkers tried to teach the proletariat how to translate its immense economic power into political clout. ... How relevant will these teachings be if the masses lose their economic value and therefore need to struggle against irrelevance rather than against exploitation?⁵

I was already worried that AGI and robotics may be sufficient to create such a “useless class” within decades, but Harari points out we should also worry about biotech:

If new treatments for extending life and upgrading physical and cognitive abilities prove to be expensive, humankind might split into biological castes.⁶

Providing universal basic services would not be sufficient to solve the problem:

Whichever way you choose to define “basic human needs,” once you provide them to everyone free of charge, they will be taken for granted, and then fierce social competitions and political struggles will focus on luxuries... Yet if the unemployed masses command no economic assets, it is hard to see how they could ever hope to obtain such luxuries. Consequently, the gap between the rich ... and the poor ... might become not merely bigger but actually unbridgeable.⁷

Right now there’s a big risk that we’ll never even manage to get food, shelter, safety, and healthcare to everyone, so worrying about how to provide equal access to luxuries seems to me like planning a marathon before you’ve learned to crawl.

But I will float an idea about how it might be addressed: perhaps “basic human needs” ought to include ensuring you have access to enough natural resources that, by combining your efforts with others in a similar socioeconomic status, you (and your descendants) could eventually build/reinvent anything and everything that the rich have, without needing charity from them or commerce with them. In other words, if the rich decide to fuck off into a transhumanist paradise and abandon the rest of us to our own devices, they should at least have the decency to leave enough raw materials lying around that we can build another transhumanist paradise of our own.

⁵Ibid., 57.

⁶Ibid., 102.

⁷Ibid., 64.

2. Ideologies

Harari describes the 20th century as a contest between three main ideologies—fascism, communism, liberalism—where the first two were successively discredited and liberalism seemed victorious. In the 21st century, he says, people have also lost faith in liberalism, at least as a unified ideal: “we are witnessing a shift from a ‘set menu approach’ to a ‘buffet mentality’”⁸ in which a bundle of ideas that were previously seen as interdependent/interrelated is now being carved apart in various ways, with each popular movement embracing some and rebelling against others. The following table, copied from the book⁹, shows Harari’s conception of traditional liberalism.

THE LIBERAL SET MENU

	NATIONAL LEVEL	INTERNATIONAL LEVEL
Economic field	Free markets, privatization, low taxes	Free trade, global integration, low tariffs
Political field	Free elections, rule of law, minority rights	Peaceful relations, multilateral cooperation, international laws and organizations
Personal field	Free choices, individualism, diversity, gender equality	Ease of personal movement and immigration

3. Government

Harari warns that AI and biotech are going to make dictatorships more efficient than democracies. Centralizing all information and decision-making will be an advantage rather than a limitation.

⁸Ibid., 30.

⁹Ibid., 31.

4. Data

Harari thinks that who owns data will be a key factor determining future (in)equality. He doesn't think corporations or governments can be trusted with full control of our personal data, but also warns that "we don't have much experience in regulating the ownership of data"¹⁰ and that figuring out how to do it properly is critical.

5. Global Civilization

Chapter 6 is a nice rebuttal of the notion that we are experiencing conflict between great, ancient, incompatible civilizations. Rather, Harari argues, humanity has undergone an astonishing degree of homogenization, and has created a single global civilization. He points out our use of common currency; common approaches to healthcare; the general agreement (notwithstanding a few disagreements) on the division of the world into nation-states; the ability to even organize things like the Olympic Games; how even groups which see themselves as standing apart, like extremist religious fundamentalists, tend to be simultaneously at odds with the actual beliefs of their ancestors and heavily influenced by modern ideologies from outside their own traditions.

Harari thinks it's crucial that we not retreat from this global civilization into nationalistic politics, because doing so would leave us with no way to coordinate solutions to the threat of nuclear war, climate change, and dangerous technological advancements. Rather, we need to become more willing to consider things from a global perspective in politics.

We now have a global ecology, a global economy, and a global science—but we are still stuck with only national politics.¹¹

A person can and should be loyal simultaneously to her family, her neighborhood, her profession, and her nation—so why not add humankind and planet Earth to that list?¹²

6. Terrorism

I liked this analogy in the chapter on terrorism:

¹⁰Ibid., 107.

¹¹Ibid., 160.

¹²Ibid.

...terrorists resemble a fly that tries to destroy a china shop. The fly is so weak that it cannot move even a single teacup. So how does a fly destroy a china shop? It finds a bull, gets inside its ear, and starts buzzing. The bull goes wild with fear and anger, and destroys the china shop.¹³

7. Truth

I think Harari (like me) could be described as more of a mistake theorist than a conflict theorist; he portrays humanity's great challenges as arising, not from immoral actions, but from the overwhelming complexity of our vast and interconnected world. Predicting the total effects of any given action or policy is very difficult. And our urge to simplify the world into something we can understand creates its own problems.

People afraid of losing their truth tend to be more violent than people who are used to looking at the world from several different viewpoints. Questions you cannot answer are usually far better for you than answers you cannot question.¹⁴

...if you want to go deeply into any subject, you need a lot of time, and in particular you need the privilege of wasting time. ... If you cannot afford to waste time, you will never find the truth.¹⁵

8. Preparation

Harari emphasizes how unprecedentedly unpredictable the 21st century will be, and how this makes it difficult to know how to prepare oneself for it. He reaches an odd conclusion:

As biotechnology and machine learning improve, it will become easier to manipulate people's deepest emotions and desires, and it will become more dangerous than ever to just follow your heart. When Coca-Cola, Amazon, Baidu, or the government knows how to pull the strings of your heart and press the buttons of your brain, will you still be able to tell the difference between your self and their marketing experts?

... you will need to work very hard ... to know what you are and what you want from life. This is, of course, the oldest advice in the book: know thyself.¹⁶

¹³Ibid., 199.

¹⁴Ibid., 255.

¹⁵Ibid., 269.

¹⁶Ibid., 319.

9. Meditation

The thing from this book that has stuck in my memory the most is a personal tidbit Harari shares near the end:

Since that first course in 2000, I began **meditating for two hours every day**, and each year I take a long meditation retreat of a month or two. **It is not an escape from reality. It is getting in touch with reality.** For at least two hours a day I actually observe reality as it is, while for the other twenty-two hours I get overwhelmed by emails and tweets and cute-puppy videos.¹⁷

I'm lucky if I can get through a ten-minute meditation session without checking my phone once or twice to see how much time is left. Two hours per day is mind-boggling to me.

¹⁷Ibid., 373, emphasis added.