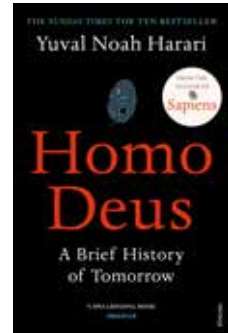


Book Reviews

Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow



By Yuval Noah Harari

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Biography: Currently employed at Headquarters Air Command, Flight Lieutenant Lee Ashcroft MA MSc BSc (Econ) RAF commissioned as a logistics officer in 2006, specialising in Air Movements. He was an MOD Fujitsu Logistics essay prize winner in 2014 and completed his Air Power in the Modern World MA as a CAS' Fellow in 2017 with King's College London.

In the sequel to his critically acclaimed best-seller, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Noah Harari's latest offering *Homo Deus* moves the reader on from explaining how we got to where we are, to where humankind is likely to head in the future. Harari's key strength is his ability to simplify complex theory in order to make it digestible by the general reader; his epistemological approach addresses the main theories of Liberalism, Humanism and the new school of 'Dataism' in a succinct manner. He illustrates the various concepts covered in his book by writing in a kind of parable form, which succeeds in producing a contextualized narrative that achieves its academic aim without being self-consciously academic in tone. His approach is reminiscent of that used by Anthony Beevor in *Stalingrad* which presented history in a non-academic and easy-to-read fashion, yet nevertheless delivered a triumphant academic analysis. Harari has achieved the same effect. Brought to life through the rich narrative of sumptuous, secondary source anecdotal material, it allows the reader to luxuriate in the examples used, while also making it interesting enough to skim-read without the need to wrestle with theoretical concepts that are difficult to grasp. By doing so, the book progresses at a pace and tempo that keeps the reader absorbed throughout. Owing to its unerring focus on humankind and the nature of the human condition, this would not normally be the sort of book that one would

expect to see reviewed in *Air Power Review*. Indeed, I would also consider it slightly *off piste* for enthusiastic military scholars seeking a traditional political narrative that provides grounding on the frictions of international politics existing in today's multi-dimensional conflicts. But this volume should not be ignored: in fact it has significant relevance to RAF personnel and academics, delivering as it does an insight into the future operating context and how the world is changing, including the effect of cyber on humanity.

Harari attempts to contextualise the fragile world in which humans live. He addresses fundamental questions with two clear aims: 'Where do we go from here?'; and 'How does the world deal with the existential and epochal threat of death and destruction caused by humankind?'. Possibly considered a prequel to the genre of recent books on 'Cybertech' conflict, such as Singer's *Wired for War* and *Ghost Fleet*, Harari deftly explores how human dominance over animals and inter-subjective influences (money, economics and policies, etc.) has driven the changing nature of modern society in war. In addressing these questions – and tackling such an existential challenge, the book is divided into 3 parts.

The first section reconciles the religious school of thought that believes in the influence of subjectivism, against the scientific view concentrating on the power of quantitative analysis and natural selection. Justifying his musings by the Roman philosopher Epicurus, he frames the new human agenda into a narrative both of individual free will, and the concept of spiritual superiority over animals existing from the agricultural revolution. In tackling such an ethereal subject, Harari makes sense of our own interpretation of history that relies on subjective experiences of animals with humankind over the millennia. He argues that humans' dominance over animals was important to the notion of human existence as well as improving the progression of knowledge that led to subsequent social revolutions and emerging central political power.

Having evolved to exercise a measure of control over the environment and other creatures, the second part of the book argues that humankind is at a tipping point of networked intelligences with a far greater capacity for reason than our own. In parts, like the first chapter, the reader is bombarded with examples, although his juxtaposition of the well-organised Pharaohs in Egypt with the slightly specious assertion of the myth-building paradigm surrounding Elvis Presley is questionable (p.186). Despite this, the paradoxical struggle between science and religion continues over the centuries. Harari believes the interpretation of truth does eventually give way to humanist value-based emotions in the twentieth century. This, he argued, brought modernism and new threats in the pursuit of power because of national wealth and economic power, thus creating survival struggles and zero-sum games - such as "Chekhov's Law" and the "smoking gun" analogy.

This seems credible. In such an environment, Harari considers an intellectual humanist schism emerging over the objective political authority (advocated by Rousseau and Nietzsche) that moves from the emotive importance of war in liberal democracy to individual values-based

humanist economics. This meant a shift of focus onto the individual as a commercial entity and whether they added value to society. He identified the cause to be that twenty-first century 'feelings' are now no longer the best ways of thinking, and that superior algorithms utilising greater computing and database power (such as Google) are being developed to determine usefulness of humans for the future. He reasons that the fundamental principles of modern liberalism and free-will which underpin democratic values of society have become flawed, arguing that individual consciousness, values and decision-making have been superseded by technology-based algorithms.

The result in the book's third section is the argument that humankind is heading towards a transition to a post-humanist state run by robots and controlled through nanotechnology. Harari contends that the Homo Sapiens species would disappear in the foreseeable future either because it had appropriated such mind-making powers as to become unrecognisable, or because it had destroyed itself through environmental catastrophe. He deems liberal beliefs of individualism will fade away into a "Dataism revolution", a universal faith in the power of algorithms (including bio-technology). His utopian view would reverse the humanist revolution and egalitarianism of the last century, bringing a strictly functional approach to humanity. By equating the human experience with data patterns, Dataism would undermine humankind's primary source of authority established by the widespread liberalism of the eighteenth century. In other words, Harari foresees that humans will eventually be sidelined as a by-product of their self-generated quest for data exploitation. While unable to predict a timeline on this seismic event, Harari argues it will happen over a few decades. However, his argument in this chapter, whilst logical, is just guesswork and not supported by any empirical data, thus stymying the impact of his argument.

Homo Deus succeeds in making complex theory readable to the layman. Harari brings panache to each argument through sound analysis and credible anecdotal examples. This approach could have provided more qualitative reasoning giving greater meaning to the cultural constructions that he uses throughout the book. Moreover, acknowledging the importance of didactic Marxist history to the debate, Harari rejects subjective reasoning and the unreliability of historical outcomes, preferring instead the sanguine arguments of the "technological bonanza" of fact that will make humans obsolete in the future. Consequently, in making it more readable to the general public, he has simplified the narrative; predictable examples such as "Google and Microsoft" are leant on as the panacea to many of humanity's social problems. These assumptions seem louché and lack depth while also diluting the impact of his theoretical rigour. These are just minor points and, overall, his aims are well argued and well balanced, making this a highly recommended read.

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