

21 Lessons for the 21st Century
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The rapid changes in technology have changed polity, society and the way people interact with each other at a pace that has confounded even thinkers of our time. A niggling question exists whether society is on the path to further human progress or is it hurtling towards destruction? Twenty years into the 21st century, social scientists to technologists, climate scientists to politicians, educationists to activists are debating on the shape that is being acquired by this century. Specialists are finding specialization inadequate for comprehending the breadth of changes, even when their tools of analysis become even more important in an increasingly complex world. The turn to the new millennium has added the question: will human beings survive as a species after having contributed to the extinction of several fellow life forms on earth?

The murkiness of the problems has added to the anxiety of our times. However, quick-fix solutions, barrage of suggestions and abundance of technology driven information have also created a noise that has made it even more difficult to make sense of the world. Yuval Noah Harari pithily

announces in the first line of his book, 21 Lessons for 21st century (pix), the primary challenge of our times: 'In a world deluged by irrelevant information, clarity is power'. He acknowledges that most people in the world do not have the luxury of thinking on where humanity is headed even when they have to bear its consequences. And thus assumes the role of a teacher by deploying his skills as a historian and philosopher to explain the swift turns of this century.

The book itself is an outcome of Harari's talks, articles and lectures that have sought to clarify the human past and its future, thoroughly elaborated in his two previous works: the Sapiens and the Homo Deus. The first book Sapiens gave a spectacular view of the human past, right from the beginning 6 billion years ago to its becoming the only species left in the human genus about 10,000 years ago; and the revolutions that transformed it as well as the violent, sometimes accidental turns in history and culture. This compelling book was followed by Homo Deus, an extrapolation of human future based on current developments in technology. It presents a future

world where human beings have conquered nature and cyborgs are common and artificial intelligence replicate and reproduce itself. He also presents the chilling possibility of human beings becoming incapable of predicting a future for itself, with loss of consciousness, imagination and other markers of human mind as inorganic life begins to dominate it. The current book, 21 Lessons attempts to fill the gap that has been left between the human past and extrapolated future, to meditate on the contemporary and present.

As in the previous work, 21 Lessons also adopts a large canvas and addresses a world audience. The exemplars are international, geographies vast, societies referred to diverse and research taken up from a variety of disciplines. According to Harari, if human existence was transformed by cognitive, agricultural, scientific revolution in the past, the current times are witnessing a technological revolution where human limitations of the body is getting conquered, human experience is getting digitised and artificial intelligence is getting better. He pitches for a thorough critique of the contemporary and puts under the scanner both the challenges and the thrilling possibilities offered by the combination of info-tech and bio-tech. Like many people writing on the subject of technology and society, Harari warns against ignorance that underlies most digital consumption and the threats it pose.

The 21 lessons are organised under five sections: the technological

challenge (consisting of four chapters; disillusionment, work, liberty and equality), the political challenge (five chapters; community, civilization, nationalism, religion and immigration), despair and hope (five chapters; terrorism, war, humility, God and secularism), truth (four chapters; ignorance, justice, post-truth and Science fiction) and resilience (three chapters; education, meaning and meditation). The section on technological challenge presents the current upheavals caused by disruptive technology and its fraught relationship with liberalism. In the chapter on 'work' there is an elaboration of these tensions. Take this puzzle: Liberalism thrives with economic growth, but that in turn depends on better and better artificial intelligence. What does jobless growth then mean? What happens to the people made irrelevant? Could technology be ethical in open markets, and are humans ethical enough for technology form interesting deliberation. Nothing is final however the urgency is communicated on thinking about post work scenarios to give human life new meanings.

There are long deliberations on future of liberal values, in a world where data bases are controlled by corporations and governments. Accordingly, frightening scenarios of digital dictatorships and irrelevant humans may be a near possibility and liberty, equality and human rights may not mean the same in a cyborg world. There is also the unsettling indication that familiar social political frameworks of human cooperation such as nation, religion, culture and

restricted civilizational views may not offer enough answers to the menace of the problems of the 21st century. Global ecological disaster may not stop at national boundaries, digital communities may demand far more from the human brain than its evolutionary equipment. Yet, there is no space for smugness in the writing: technology is neither a panacea for all ills, nor is a Luddite slamming down of artificial intelligence demanded. The examples are riveting and the reader is persuaded to recognize the monumental changes taking place and the sheer ignorance through which most people walk into its consequences.

The human predicaments of contemporary times are also deeply personal and significantly political. Achievements, ethics and personal values are seen by most people from own cultural reference point, which has often led to significant animosity towards other groups and destructive wars. Harari tears into 'self-important narratives' (p 181) in the chapter on 'Humility', by placing claims within thousands of years of world history and animal studies to point ethics as an evolutionary development and ridiculousness of contending claims of superiority by one community over another.

In a bewildering world is there anything that could anchor people to reality? Harari refers to humility as a key requirement in order to wade through ignorance, secular ideals and a few thumb rules for seeking out truth in an era of post truth. One of the important discussions in the book is on the future

of education. As technological disruption increases, it is pointed out that there is as yet no scaleable model for preparing people for the disruptions that awaits them and their mental systems. Most learning from today may become irrelevant and the skills for thriving in 2050 and beyond, is unpredictable as bodies, brains and minds get engineered. The stress of fluidity and responding to change requires mental stamina and this could be the life resource of the future. He opines that education also will have to eventually prepare humans to decide if they will retain control over themselves or if they surrender themselves to acts of algorithms. In this light, Harari opines that the grand narratives may have to come back to the classroom, if students have to make sense of mountains of information that are at their disposal. He leaves us with his own experiences of seeing through fiction, and his personal experience of corporal reality.

Harari has emerged as a popular thought provoking public intellectual of the current times. For a historian who demonstrated an absolute command on the narrative with *Sapiens*, he wanders in the current book as themes overlap and present defies structure. It may even be asked, are big challenges of global ecological crisis, social-political upheavals even possible to be addressed with experiencing the bodily reality of breath. Or is it another fiction. There could even be quibbles with his style of arguments. At times it may even sound preposterous to some to find examples of Disney's *Lion King* sharing space with national and human

histories-seen in the chapter on 'Meaning'. But, the message is clear: Sapiens are going through a century that will require them to constantly reinvent themselves as bewildering changes envelop them in all possible ways. Nothing is pre-destined and

there could still be a liberal hope from society, even as liberalism faces the biggest challenge since its emergence as a political system. The book is a tribute for a level global playing field in a technologically disruptive world.