

Wealden Business group

Book Review 15 August 2018 "Sapiens" A Brief History of Humankind by Yuval Noah Harari

Report by Bill Ferguson

The success of this book has surprised the pundits. For a history book to hit the best seller list and stay there for (currently) 4 years is unusual. The Guardian Bookseller refer to: "the brainy backlist", recognising a new trend as readers turn away from glitzy celebs to serious educational books. The writing style in Sapiens is precise and logical. A guided overview of our history as a species, written by a thoughtful, professional historian.

But that is not why I selected this book.

It kept popping up in online conversations and podcasts in connection with business and entrepreneurship and having read it, I can see why. I realised that Harari is looking at Homo Sapiens as a business that has done quite well and is now at a tipping point.

When it's time to sell or pass on a business to someone else, a conscientious owner might prepare a report showing the history of the enterprise, the financial accounts, maybe an analysis of strengths and weaknesses and perhaps an educated guess at future challenges and an indication of how these might be met.

This is what we have: a business owner's report. Prepared in readiness for a handover.

The book divides itself into 4 parts.

1. **The cognitive revolution:** a biological history of our species, revealing to us the hardships and feats of our ancestors.

Human beings (members of the genus Homo) have existed for about 2.4m years. Homo sapiens has only existed for 6% of that time – about 150,000 years. Following the "cognitive" revolution: about 70,000 years ago, we spread rapidly across the planet, overcame the other species, most significantly the Neanderthal, to achieve world domination. That was when we developed speech, which enabled us to make bigger social groups than our ancestors had managed, and to

organise them better. And it's the point at which we use tribal history to teach our children. Stories around the campfire preserve and renew the oral history of our ancestors.

Sapiens are ecological serial killers – even with stone-age tools, our ancestors wiped out half the planet's large terrestrial mammals well before the advent of agriculture.

2. **The Agricultural Revolution:** the foundation of static human civilisations.

About 11,000 years ago we enter on the agricultural revolution, converting in increasing numbers from foraging (hunting and gathering) to farming. Wheat domesticated Sapiens rather than the other way around.

"the agricultural revolution was history's biggest fraud". Mostly it brought a worse diet, longer hours of work, greater risk of starvation, crowded living conditions, greatly increased susceptibility to disease, new forms of insecurity and uglier forms of hierarchy. "

"The treatment of animals in modern industrial agriculture might well be the greatest crime in history".

Talking to "millennials" two big issues are plastic pollution and veganism.

3. **The Unification of Humankind**

The evolution of money and connected to this the spread of empires and trade. How cultures evolved, how capitalism came into being, and how religion developed.

Money is the most universal system of mutual trust ever devised. Capitalism is a religion rather than just an economic theory – and it is the most successful religion to date because nearly everyone believes in it. Money is the only thing everyone trusts (as long as it's a stable currency blessed by the high priests such as Moody's, and Standard and Poor).

Empire is the most successful political system humans have invented, and our present era of anti-imperial sentiment is probably a short-lived aberration.

We see religion degenerating into radical fundamentalism as polytheisms are replaced by more toxic monotheisms.

4. **The Scientific Revolution:** as Homo Sapiens rose from mere animals with subjective capabilities, to custodians of the natural world; we discovered medicine and efficient energy, but also the power to wipe out civilisations.

Began about 500 years ago. It triggered the industrial revolution, about 250 years ago, then came the information revolution, about 50 years ago, and now we are experiencing the biotechnological revolution. Sapiens will soon disappear. With the help of novel technologies, genetic engineering, by creating cyborgs, or by changing again the way we communicate. A collective consciousness (Borg?). Sapiens are about to upgrade themselves into bioengineered post-humans

Some favourite quotes from the book:

We are capable of abstract thought and complex language to share and record our thoughts. Peugeot, is treated as a person according to French law.

We rule the world because we are the only animal that can demand belief in things that exist purely in our own imagination, such as gods, states, money (or more importantly credit); and human rights.

The concept of a holiday is a Romantic invention and no self-respecting Pharaoh would have dreamt of taking his wife on a shopping trip to Babylon

Harari says "only a criminal buys a house by handing over a suitcase of banknotes" – a point that is poignant when an estimated 35% of all purchases at the high end of the London housing market are currently being paid in cash.

As I mentioned in my introduction, Sapiens PLC is ready for rebranding. Will it fly, or will it crash and burn?

The scene is set for his next book: Homo Deus in which speculation and prediction combine to develop the theme of the future that might be waiting for us.

