

# A CURATE'S EGG

21 Lessons

for the

21<sup>st</sup> Century

by

Yuval Noah Harari

**Let there be no mistake, this book is very good in many parts. Harari's previous books, *Sapiens: A Brief history of Humankind* and *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* have established his status as a publisher's dream author. We know that widening perspective provides wisdom; that deeper analysis produces better insights; and that a well-turned phrase stays with and even convinces a reader. Harari has huge and varied perspectives; his insights emerge from deep analysis; and his phrases are often brilliantly constructed. Why then does he not consistently convince me?**

Harari gives us twenty-one chapters. They have all been previously published as articles and essays. A major task for him is to establish a thread so that the collection can be called a book in the sense of a coherent set of chapters. I suggest reading the introduction again when reaching the end. It might help to resolve the coherence question. Reading the acknowledgements I felt the coherence to have been contrived, especially as the idea for the book came from the publisher who had seen big sales of the first, backward looking, book and the second, forward looking, book. Harari was then asked for a NOW looking book.

Israel is mentioned a lot in his book. He does not flatter the country or Zionism or Judaism. He does not hide injustice, though he expresses his loyalty to Israel. It is where he lives, on land from where in living memory indigenous people were expelled to make room for colonists. He does not mention that. I wonder if his vast historical perspective can be summarised in a Modern Hebrew expression, 'Yer besedr'. When someone asks an urgent question about what might be a crisis that phrase is often used in response: 'Don't worry, it will be all right'.

*Might we be held accountable for profiting from injustice?*

*Don't worry. Enlarge your historical perspective. It will be all right.*

I shall return to what I see as the issue of his academic indifference later because he provides opportunities to do so.

Harari clusters his chapters into five parts. The first is The Technological Challenge. Next we are given The Political Challenge. Despair and Hope follows. Then we get War, Truth and finally Resilience. His job, as he explains in his Introduction, is not to give people food or clothes but to make things clear. His purpose is to offer the clarity that will empower more people to engage in debate 'about the future of our species'.

I question some of that 'clarity'. His last chapter is entitled MEDITATION. He recounts his restless youth and his frustration at being offered truthless tales of explanation. Eventually he turns to meditation. Now he meditates for two hours a day and every year he devotes one or two months to meditation. He sees it as a 'valuable tool in the scientific toolkit, especially when trying to understand the human mind'. I am sure that it is. Nevertheless, he seems unable to throw off the pre-judgments that abound in the world that he seeks to make clear for us. To define is to classify and to label. It also requires the selection of examples. What examples does he choose in order to clarify the world for us?

His chapter on Terrorism is a good example of the shortcomings of his selectivity. He assumes that states cannot be terrorists. I remember that the USA classified Geronimo as a terrorist. We might think of him as resisting state terror. French resistance during World War Two is celebrated. How do you go from being a despised terrorist to a celebrated resistance fighter? Harari does not allow himself to become entangled in such a question but it has to be said that historians play a huge part in selective classifying.

As an act of terror he cites the Lockerbie bombing when Pan-Am flight 103 was blown up. So it was. He does not cite Iran Air flight 655 that was shot down by the US Navy operating in support of Sadam Hussein's attempted invasion of Iran. For that act the USA awarded the captain a medal and Bush the Elder refused to apologise. Carried out on behalf of a state that act cannot, if we use Harari's definition, be classified as terror.

His labels can be distributed somewhat casually. In his chapter on Justice he writes:

***I can live peacefully at home, never raising a finger to harm anyone, and yet according to left-wing activists, I am a full partner to the wrongs inflicted by Israeli soldiers and settlers in the West Bank."***

Disregarding the misplaced comma that fails to demarcate his sub-ordinate clause we are supposed to accept words such as 'left-wing', 'activists' and 'wrongs' without explanation. He invites us to accept the prejudgements that have created those labels. I wonder if, as an historian, he remembers how we acquired the terms 'left' and 'right' to describe not exactly our political views but our approach to how government should be carried out. To be on the left

indicates a preference for inclusion: to be on the right exclusion in the form of absolute government. 1789 is not so long ago. By the way, is 'activist' a derogatory term?

Much of the book is about concepts. He wishes to clarify for us concepts that he believes have lost validity. What does it mean to be liberal? Has liberalism any meaningful power today? What about communism? Is it finished?

Harari links liberalism with the concept of liberty: a notion that empowers individuals. Perhaps Milton might help here.

**Licence they mean when they cry Liberty;  
For who loves that must first be wise and good:  
But from that mark how far they rove we see,  
For all this waste of wealth and loss of blood.**

The L-Word can encompass freedom from tyranny, freedom to exploit the resources of the earth and freedom to enslave others. And yet we also use it as a righter of wrongs and as an includer rather than an excluder. The British Welfare State owes more to the Liberal Party than it does to the Labour Party. It owes nothing to the Conservative Party. Why, I wonder, did I scribble in my notebook while reading this book the question, 'Is Harari a conservative?' I am aware that I have just used another simplistic label so let me try to explain why.

There is more to communism than was ever displayed by those states claiming to be communist. Nevertheless, he uses the word as though for much of the twentieth century we were presented with two choices: liberalism as a force for largely commercial liberty and communism as a constraint upon humanity.

Remembering that Marx said that he was not a Marxist if it meant being like some people who claimed that they were it is worth remembering that while writing about capital, as he mostly did, Marx gave us two important concepts. They are commodification and alienation. Harari has lots of clever insights into the impact of artificial intelligence and the power of the algorithm to manage humans so why, I wonder, did he not, when discussing communism, spend time looking at those two concepts? I think the answer is that we are not reading a book but a collection of short pieces.

**To borrow from WH Auden's advice on how to combine taste and judgment when writing about a book and bearing in mind what the curate said about the egg, Harari has given us a mostly good book and I mostly like it but I wish that instead of sticking bits together he had taken some time off meditating and done a proper job.**

**Cliff Jones 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2018**