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Review - Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind

Most books about the history of humanity pursue either a historical or a biological approach, but Dr. Yuval Noah Harari breaks the mold with this highly original book that begins about 70,000 years ago with the appearance of modern cognition. From examining the role evolving humans have played in the global ecosystem to charting the rise of empires, Sapiens integrates history and science to reconsider accepted narratives, connect past developments with contemporary concerns, and examine specific events within the context of larger ideas.

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind

Going in, I thought this book was going to be boring(or mediocre at best). It's a book purely about the history of humankind, and I've fallen asleep in my fair share of social studies classes. However, I could not have been more wrong. Although I don't necessarily agree with everything the author(Harari) said, his style of writing is absolutely brilliant. Below are the two best qualities of his writing style in particular:

1. You can tell he's a genius. First off, he's written a book endorsed by Bill Gates, but other than that, his verbiage is of class and intelligence. However, it is also strikingly easy to follow. Although most of the book is centered around complex origins and evolution of sociological topics, he does an amazing job bringing the content down to the level of the reader without missing aspects of the bigger picture. I've found that history can often get tedious and ambiguous—there are so many sides to the same story that it can get cumbersome(or worse confusing) to attempt to analyze and dissect potential perspectives. Although the book does get complex, Harari is a true scholar in the sense that he bases conclusions solely on his academic findings, with little to no traces of biases. In relation to current social “trends”, he often contradicts himself when drawing conclusions and forming hypotheses. Additionally, the book is written from a sociological perspective rather than a historical one. To iterate this point, after reading the book, I have a slightly better grasp of the history of humankind. Rather, my ideas of how trends, tendencies, cultures, and inter-subjective(this is a brilliant word that is introduced in the book) phenomena evolve and interact with each other have been strengthened.

2. Building on the last point, although this is a “history” book, Harari uses time as a guide rather than a rigid path. The book has a deeper sociological meaning. He explains and identifies sociological occurrences and developments in a generally chronological timeline(so the reader can get a good sense of how the different developments interacted/influenced each other), but Harari has no reservations about skipping far into the future or back in the past to reinforce or provide examples for a conclusion.
 - a. Although history is “one-way”, there is so much we don’t know about how certain events played out, and I think it can be easy to get caught in the mindset that you believe the history you know to be absolutely correct. I wish that Harari had spoken to this point more(the cataloging, or mis-cataloging, of historical events), however, he did a great job making objective conclusions based on evidence.

There were lots of controversial topics and opinions that would upset certain readers, but overall I thought the book was stellar. Regardless of content, the author does an exceptional job taking an innovative and interesting approach to history(something every instructor I have had has yet to do), and he writes understandably and colloquially. Whenever anyone asked me how the book was I would generally respond with, “You can tell this guy’s [the author] a genius, but he writes in a way that I, a non-genius, can understand and connect with, and that’s very hard to do.”