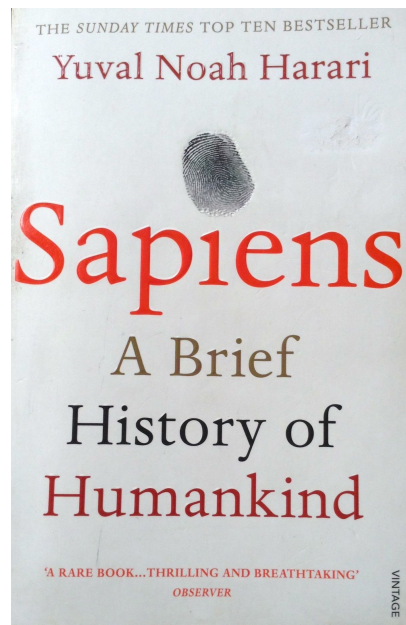


Not So Sapiens After All

Lessons for Welfare from a history teacher

David Zigmond

© 2017



The trials and tribulations of our Welfare system have deeper and more complex roots than many can imagine. A recent and remarkable book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* can greatly help deepen and broaden our understanding.

Sapiens – A Brief History of Humankind is a writer's force of nature. It presents as a large book – nearly five hundred pages – yet this is remarkably small for a work of such historical scope and intellectual variety. These, together with literary panache, yield us both a Tardis and Aladdin's Cave of ideas.

Yuval Noah Harari is an academic in World History and his quest here is to offer an evolutionary history of humankind. This he does by constructing an often speculative narrative, taking us from our mindless biological roots to (his) imagined future scenarios of robots, cyborgs and humans, where our triumphant intelligence has rendered us:

Self-made gods with only the laws on physics to keep us company, we are accountable to no one. We are consequently wreaking havoc on our fellow animals and on the surrounding ecosystem, seeking little more than our own comfort and amusement, yet never finding satisfaction.

Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who don't know what they want?

This bleak possibility and stark question are, in fact, the book's very last passages – Harari's dark coda to end a vivid, varifocal and often brilliantly orchestrated (his)story.

*

Even before we start, the book's back cover offers an alluringly sharp synopsis signposting the trenchant writing within.

100,000 years ago, at least six human species inhabited the earth. Today there is just one.

Us

Homo sapiens.

Why did our foraging ancestors come together to create cities and kingdoms?

And what will our world be like in millennia to come?

Harari sources his myriad of evolutionary streams to three major transitions: The Cognitive Revolution (language, writing and abstract thought), The Agricultural Revolution (domestication; the concepts of property, time investment and instrumentalism; the harnessing of nature), The Scientific Revolution (investigative knowledge; the control of nature; the growth of industry, capital, empire and social control).

These panoramic explorations are not confined to the relative safety of *what* probably happened, but extend to the riskier *why*. Harari builds his formulations from a wondrously wide range of original source documents, art and artefact, and established disciplines – archaeology, anthropology, biology, physics, agriculture ... all of these bulk-out the ‘what’; sociology and a wise choice of psychologies humanise the ‘why’ and lead to the book’s unusual and engaging qualities: this is also an *experiential* history. So Harari portrays what he imagines was the likely day-to-day social and subjective experience of our forebears. When he then weaves in parallel descriptions of religious or political developments he often anchors these in humankind’s deeper, rarely directly articulated, fears and hauntings. In this way he auras the pith of likely facts with the ever-present spiritual and existential, as he

understands them. Such balance between academic rigour and inter-subjective imagination is probably something of a doomed high-wire act in Academia.

Inside the front cover is another brief array of visual soundbites; I imagine Harari help crystallise:

FIRE gave us power; GOSSIP helped us cooperate; AGRICULTURE made us hungry for more; MYTHOLOGY maintained law and order; MONEY gave us something we can really trust; CONTRADICTIONS created culture; SCIENCE made us deadly.

Maybe no one has yet termed 'holistic history', but here must be a supreme example: a creative unification of the apparently disparate and unconnected. The resulting synthesis hums with new life.

*

Sapiens was published in 2011 and quickly gathered critical acclaim and brisk sales. Starting to read it six years later, I looked forward to a bracing whirlwind tour of history. What I did not anticipate was how relevant, illuminating and galvanising I would find all this – this enormous tapestry – in how I perceive and conceive my immeasurably smaller area of interest: our current public Welfare and its conundrums.

Harari's notions of long-vanished worlds are often startlingly relevant to what we struggle with today: this is painfully true of our Welfare. Of course this could be dismissed as merely a twenty-first century projection onto all else. Equally, yet more

important, it may signal our perennial impasses and follies, and then the truth of the adage: the most reliable lesson from history is that we do not learn from history.

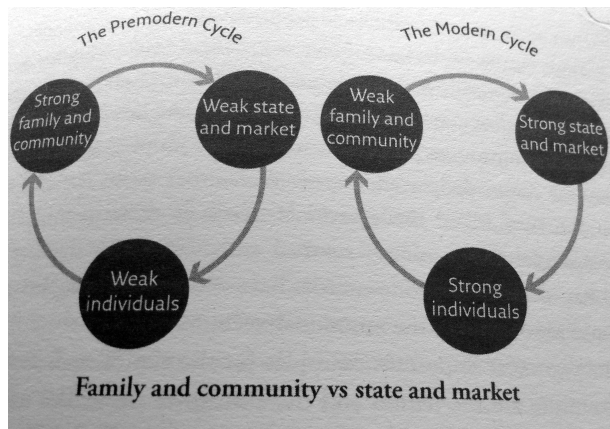
Many of the book's passages convey this so well as to merit extended quotes.

Healthcare's current escalating traps and follies – industrialisation, monetisation, marketisation, commodification, reification of the abstract and ideological, the tragic fate of the simplistic – all are present in this sampling. The reader can surely identify apposite examples from our current political, social and welfare predicaments:

- *Most human cooperation networks have been geared towards oppression and exploitation. The peasants paid for the burgeoning cooperation networks with their precious food surpluses, despairing when the tax collector wiped out an entire year of hard labour with a single stroke of his imperial pen.*
- *This is why cynics don't build empires and why an imagined order can be maintained only if large segments of the population – and in particular large segments of the elite and security forces – truly believe in it ... How do you cause people to believe in an imagined order such as Christianity, democracy or capitalism? First, you never admit that the order is imagined. You always insist that the order sustaining society is an objective reality created by the great gods or by the laws of nature.*
- *There is no way out of the imagined order [of intersubjective myth]. When we break down our prison walls and run towards freedom, we are in fact running into the more spacious exercise yard of a bigger prison.*
- *The most important impact of script on human history is precisely this: it has gradually changed the way humans think and view the world. Free association and holistic thought has given way to compartmentalisation and bureaucracy.*

- *Writing was born as the maidservant of human consciousness, but is increasingly becoming its master. Our computers have trouble understanding how Homo sapiens feel and dream. So we are teaching Homo sapiens to talk, feel and dream in the language of numbers, which can be understood by computers.*
- *Such [human and societal] contradictions are an inseparable part of every human culture. In fact, they are culture's engines, responsible for the creativity and dynamism of our species. Just as when two clashing musical notes played together force a piece of music forward, so discord in our thoughts, ideas and values compels us to think, re-evaluate and criticise. Consistency is the playground of dull minds.*
- *When the natives questioned Cortés (the conquering Spanish conquistador of Mexico in 1519) as to why the Spaniards had such a passion for gold, the conquistador answered, 'Because I and my companions suffer from a disease of the heart which can be cured only with gold'.*
- *When everything is convertible, and when trust depends on anonymous coins and cowry shells, it corrodes local traditions, intimate relations and human values, replacing them with the cold laws of supply and demand ... Human communities and families have always been based on belief in 'priceless' things, such as honour, loyalty, morality and love. These things lie outside the domain of the market, and they shouldn't be bought or sold for money ... As money brings down the dams of community, religion and state, the world is in danger of becoming one big and rather heartless marketplace.*
- *Treating living creatures possessing complex emotional worlds as if they were machines is likely to cause them not only physical discomfort, but also much social stress and psychological frustration ... The tragedy of industrial agriculture is that it takes great care of the objective needs of animals, while neglecting their subjective needs.*

- *This [capitalist-consumer ideal] is the first religion in history whose followers actually do what they are asked to do. How, though, do we know that we'll really get paradise in return? We've seen it on television.*
- *Yet all of these upheavals are dwarfed by the most momentous social revolution that ever befell humankind: the collapse of the family and the local community and their replacement by the state and the market.*



- *In the last two centuries, the intimate communities have withered, leaving imagined communities to fill the vacuum.*

*

Some might find Harari's bold speculations too unprovable, too reckless, to assimilate and take seriously. Yet I was heartened to find a broad historical view that seemed to grasp the human heart and mind of our long stories and struggles. This relief contrasts strongly with recent years' contact with medical colleagues, managers, planners, academics and politicians who seem to me dishearteningly increasingly out of touch with the human heart and mind in healthcare. Indeed, such evisceration of the human mind and heart is a deliberate preliminary in our burgeoning and mandatory 'systems' that now predicate the entire span of our activities, from personal consultations to the political manoeuvring of our largest institutions. It has become *cultural*.

How has this happened? How have we devised systems of human welfare that attempt to refine themselves by jettisoning the primacy of understanding better our nature's vagaries? Some of the sampled notions of this historian can help us here: the cognitive inhibitions of writing (and its computerised developments), the destruction of natural bonds and ecosystems in systematised farming, the destruction of human bonds from ideologically driven marketisation. No, Harari is not intending to write about healthcare: he is attempting to map large historical currents. But his big picture captures clearly so much of importance that we recurrently do not, or will not, see. We instead become in thrall to our own culture, and then are conscious only of the detail of its inner mechanisms; its larger working and directions lie beyond our depth of field.

*

Harari quotes from a 1942 German biology textbook:

The battle for existence is hard and unforgiving, but is the only way to maintain life. The struggle eliminates everything that is unfit for life, and selects everything that is able to survive ... These natural laws are incontrovertible; living creatures demonstrate them by their very survival. They are unforgiving. Those who resist them will be wiped out. Biology not only tells us about animals and plants, but also shows us the laws we must follow in our lives, and steels our wills to live and fight according to these laws. The meaning of life is struggle. Woe to him who sins against these laws.

Marie Harm and Hermann Wiehle (1942) *Lebenskunde für Mittelschulen – Fünfter Teil. Klasse 5 für Jungen*.

Such was the banal yet malign fare from a grotesquely dark regime now almost beyond the horizon of living memory.

Today we live in relatively beneficent times, surely?

Yet let us say you are an employee of our now competitively marketised NHS. You have provided trusting, loving vocational care for many years. But this is hard to measure and your NHS Trust is small, economically pusillanimous and liable to be deemed 'economically unviable. For closure under our *Sustainability and Transformation Plan ...*'

The above passage will send through you a chill of recognition.

*

History is like some of our great music: our many interwoven themes have many guises, variations and returns.

History is not just for historians.

-----0-----

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind. Yuval Noah Harari (2011). Vintage

Interested? Many articles exploring similar themes are available via David Zigmond's home page on www.marco-learning-systems.com

David Zigmond would be pleased to receive your **FEEDBACK**