

## Sapiens A Brief History of Humankind

Understanding human history and how our evolution has shaped cultures and beliefs, is a difficult task. In the book, *Sapiens A Brief History of Humankind* by Yuval Noah Harari, it looks at human evolution through time and how it has shaped cultures, religions, and everyday life. It focuses more on the past than how it actually connects to the present, but the links to the present can be made. Harari effectively uses three important revolutions—cognitive, agricultural, and scientific—to show how they have shaped human history, and their culture.

The cognitive revolution focused on the idea that humans were able to think abstractly about concepts, unlike other animals. Humans are unique in the fact that unlike other animals, our evolution has favored a large, and energy costly brain, instead of muscles or another adaptation. However, because of the large brain, it has allowed humans to become social, share information, and cooperate. Language was invented to share information, and pass on skills. This allowed for cooperation in order to create and build a society, as well as planning for events that have not happened.

What I found interesting was the fact that there was seven different Homo species, but all but one died out. All of the species had a large brain, but they differed in their ability to communicate, as well as other anatomical features. The different species also originated in different parts of the world. The replacement hypothesis makes more sense than the inbreeding hypothesis since as Harari stated “tolerance is not a Sapiens trademark.” (Harari 19). Scientific evidence does prove that there was some inbreeding, but only a small percent of the modern population is made up of descendents from Neanderthals, or Denisovans. The small percentage indicates that Sapiens did rarely reproduce with Neanderthals and Denisovans to produce fertile offspring. Another point that was interesting was the information about the ability to share stories through language, a skill only Sapiens had. They would “gossip” which allowed them to form closer social ties. This is very different than the gossip of modern day, where it seems to divide people apart by sharing false information. The definition is different than the present day connotation.

The agricultural revolution revolved around the ability of humans to be able to plant, and harvest crops, as well as the domestication of animals. Harari points out that humans were able to start planting, and harvesting grain. This allowed for a larger yield in food, which could support a larger population. Animals were also subjected to artificial selection, so that they would benefit human needs. Modern day farm animals, like sheep, goats, cattle, had to be domesticated and bred into animals that we are familiar with in the modern day. With agriculture, it allowed humans to settle down into a more

permanent lifestyle, instead having to move to find food. Since people were able to settle they started to form villages and towns, which eventually led to cities, they were coming up with laws and religion to explain and help regulate society. Social hierarchies were also formed.

As Harari is exploring how humanity came together because of agriculture, he leads into the social effects. Religion is a reoccurring topic through the first two categories, cognitive and agricultural, however it has been a driving force throughout most of history. I can understand why it is placed under both agricultural and cognitive revolution since it is a product of those and was not a sudden change in the world by itself. It was a gradual process that started with people thinking and living in communities together. It was important that religion was given a separate section in order to fully explore the impact that it has had on society. Harari notes how religion comes with a set of rules that have or still do impact society or at least the person in the religion. In some countries religious rules were the law, and the general public had to follow them. The comparisons of how multiple religions have created guidelines for their followers was interesting to read, since often times there were many similarities of basic ideas. Overall the section of the agricultural revolution focused on the effects that were produced from people living in communities and forming rules to ensure that order was maintained.

The scientific revolution focused on the idea that to know is knowledge and this led to the investigation and curiosity of the natural world. They experimented with many different schools of thought including the natural world, and the social world. The scientific theory does not only need to be restricted to the sciences, but can be applied to any sort of question or hypothesis. It is just a way to test an idea. This section covers more modern day material, including capitalism, religion, and social problems. It covers the idea of intelligent design and the fact that it was not being challenged. Humans were using abstract ideas, like money and culture, to define the society that they lived in.

When I started the section, I expected the idea of scientific revolution to focus more on sciences, like biology and chemistry, and not the economic changes that happened. As I progressed with the section, it became more clear that it was focused on the pursuit of knowledge through experimentation. Capitalism was an experiment that stayed.

Darwinism was another idea that was found through experimentation and careful observation. Overall, I preferred this section since it connected it more to modern day and how the human race has transitioned into the modern era because of curiosity and the drive to know things and not settle for a divine explanation.

By categorizing the evolution of the human race into three revolutions—cultural, agricultural, and scientific—Harari has demonstrated how they have shaped human culture and history. The cognitive revolution focused on the how the development of the brain allowed Homo Sapiens to succeed and evolve. The agricultural revolution focused

on the fact that farming and domestication allowed humans to settle in one place to form communities. The scientific revolution allowed humans to pursue knowledge and experiment in different ways. Overall, the book made many good points that made me consider a different viewpoint about the human evolution; however, the style of the book was not my favorite. I found it slightly repetitive and wordy, which made it difficult to finish the book.

## Work Cited

Harari, Yuval N., and Derek Perkins. *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. London: Harvill Secker, 2014.