*21 Lessons for the 21st Century*: Predictions about Future Globalization

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Approaches and Schools of Thought in Political Science

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Introduction

This paper is submitted as a capstone to the Israeli National Defense College course “Approaches and Schools of Thought in Political Science: From the Polis to Globalization.” The course afforded students an opportunity to explore numerous political science theories and approaches, as applied to historical examples and modern politics. I chose to examine Yuval Noah Harari’s work *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* and explore how the issues discussed relate to globalization. For this endeavor, I will summarize Harari’s book, analyze his interwoven ideas on globalization, and study his approaches to globalization. I will also consider two reviews of *21 Lessons* and attempt to analyze Harari’s concepts through different approaches. But first, let us start by defining globalization.

Globalization Defined

Nearly every person on the planet has been touched by the phenomenon of globalization. Whether rich or poor, living in a highly developed country or in one at the lower end of the development spectrum, almost every citizen of the world has been affected. Some are ‘winners’ of globalization, their wealth and status perceptibly increased by the effects of an increasingly connected world. Others are ‘losers,’ never to fully recover the livelihoods they once enjoyed and to which they and their families became accustomed. Given globalization’s powerful impact on so many, it is natural that it would be studied, debated, and discussed. In these discourses, “globalization” can be used as a term, a concept, and a phenomenon. As such, it is important to be clear whether globalization the concept or globalization the phenomenon is being discussed.

What are the differences? First, let us examine the term “globalization.” All fields of study have common terms and the practitioners of each respective field must come to some agreement on the meanings of such terms. Political science is no different.

The Collins Dictionary provides two primary definitions for globalization:

1: the process enabling financial and investment markets to operate internationally, largely as a result of deregulation and improved communications

2: the emergence since the 1980s of a single world market dominated by multinational companies, leading to a diminishing capacity for national governments to control their economies

Neither definition is perfect—the second should have included elements of cultural integration—but it is clear from these two definitions that the first is describing a concept and the second, a phenomenon. While we must remember that the phenomenon of globalization as we know it today was brought about by matters described in the concept of globalization, this paper is about the phenomenon and not the concept.

21 Lessons

In *21 Lessons*, Harari presents a wide range of diverse ideas and concepts loosely tied together under five parts: the challenges humans face, a “wide range of potential responses,” a pronouncement that “humankind can rise to the occasion,” arguments that humans are ignorant and irrational, and finally, his thoughts on the meaning of life. A few themes emerge. One of them is the predicted irrelevance of almost all humans, an unavoidable risk that will result from a class of super humans made possible by convergence in advances in biotechnology and information technology. Another theme is that humans have accomplished so much more than other animals because they are able to unite behind myths. For example, nationalism and religion are made possible because millions of humans can believe and act upon false information. Harari celebrates liberalism’s triumph over fascism and communism, but fears that liberalism’s dominance could be short lived as new forms of inequality find their places.

Harari and Globalization

The central theme of *21 Lesssons* has to do with globalization. Many of Harari’s analyses and predictions originate from globalization’s unfulfilled “promise” (p74) to continue reducing inequality in the twenty-first century. He calls globalization “a huge racket [that] empower[s] a tiny elite at the expense of the masses” (p5). In support, he cites statistics that “the richest 1 percent own half the world’s wealth” and that “the richest one hundred people together own more than the poorest four billion” (p75). Harari does not waste time discussing the relaxed regulation and advances in transportation and communication that led to the globalized world of today. However, his focus on globalization is direct and explicit: “My agenda here is global…this book tries to cover different aspects of our global predicament (p xiv)…this book takes a global perspective (p xv).” The book discusses global problems and issues common to many regions of the world, such as nationalism, immigration, terrorism, war, religion, and technological advancements outpacing societal adjustments.

Harari predicts major societal upheaval in the next few decades, brought on by a confluence of three calamities that are beyond the scope of anything humankind has yet faced. These are nuclear war, caused by destabilization in the mutually assured destruction framework; climate change that has the potential for creating a worldwide healthcare crisis and massive new waves of immigration; and technological advances that threaten to render “irrelevant” (p77) major portions of the world population. The last of those is one to which Harari devotes considerable attention.

Harari predicts that technological advancements will eliminate jobs faster than the global economy can create new ones. For example, he illustrates that 3D printing can make possible a scenario in which shirt buyers can simply download a “code” from Amazon and send it to a local printer to be manufactured, thus rendering jobless “millions” of Bangladeshis (p39). Indians in Bangalore working in call centers could soon lose their jobs to AI representatives that will not only provide assistance, but do so in an accent and tone that will match the caller’s preferences (p39). Perhaps most alarming, but not altogether farfetched, is Harari’s prediction of the creation of a super-human race or species, brought about by advances in biotechnology. He fears that such a group would “result in speciation: the divergence of humankind into different biological castes” (p76). Carrying the idea further, “ruling oligarchies in countries as diverse as the United States and Russia might merge and make common cause against the mass or ordinary humans…such a scenario might even deglobalize the world, as the upper caste congregates inside a self-proclaimed ‘civilization’ and builds walls and moats to separate it from the hordes of ‘barbarians’ outside” (p76).

The recurring theme of inequity and the extreme empowerment of a small number of humans or super-humans are clear indicators that Harari is using an elitist approach to analyze the present situation and where he sees the world over the next several decades. That is not to say that Harari is arguing for rule by a small number of elites; indeed he is not. Harari is displeased with the growing inequities purportedly caused by globalization: “This situation [the shift in wealth to a small number of people] could get far worse…improvements in biotechnology might make it possible to translate economic inequality into biological inequality” (p75). Such an outlook and analysis of power dynamics is entirely consistent with the frameworks developed by the early twentieth century elitist thinkers.

Reviews

Steven Poole’s review in the Wall Street Journal (Poole) is useful for examining political science theories as they apply to *21 Lessons*. Poole discusses Harari’s description of the public’s disillusionment with the “global elite” and the resulting wave of populism that has led to Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. Certainly, in highlighting Trump’s stoking Americans’ fears that their jobs would go to Mexico and China, Harari is analyzing Trump’s election victory through a Marxist approach.

Poole goes on to challenge Harari’s claim that “rationality is a myth.” Indeed, a central theme in *21 Lessons* is that humans are irrational. This comes out in Harari’s claim that humans spend too much time worrying about terrorism and humans’ willingness to believe in myths. Poole subscribes to rational choice theory but finds that Harari’s observations and predictions do not fit, citing as evidence findings of behavioral economics.

Bill Gates also wrote a review on *21 Lessons*, which was published in the New York Times (Gates). Like Poole, Gates uses the Marxist approach to analyze Harari’s work. Gates wrote that he was “glad to see the chapter on inequality”; clear evidence of a Marxist analysis, given Harari’s focus on material inequality in this chapter. Gates signals his agreement with Harari that rational choice theory is not well suited to analyzing human behavior in his remarks that he struggled at both Microsoft and the Gates Foundation with the problem that “not just ordinary voters and customers” were beset by ignorance and groupthink, but so were “presidents and CEOs.”

Different Approaches

I wish Harari had better developed his illustration of the lower biological "caste" that he describes as being pushed outside the "walls and moats" built by a new global elite. What will society look like inside this community of regular humans? What about the economy? Since these people will still have survival needs--food, water, shelter--will they meet these needs individually or will bartering systems develop? Will currencies remain as an efficient means of conducting transactions? What will governing structures look like? Will they be as advanced as the political frameworks in place today? How will political science theories such as Marxism, Pluralism, Elitism, and Public Choice have relevance in analyzing these structures?

Conclusion

Harari provides in 21 Lessons a fascinating look at mankind. Working together, humans have reshaped the world and accomplished nearly unbelievable feats. In order to do so, we have had to overcome significant weaknesses of the human brain—a brain that Harari claims has evolved little since the days that humans originated in the African savannah. Yet ironically, for all of these achievements, including the globalization of our entire population, our very existence is under threat by our own innovation. While readers might not agree with everything that Harari has written, or the models he uses to analyze human interaction, he certainly provides thought-provoking material and an opportunity to debate the state of the human experience.

Works Cited

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