

Approaches and School of Thought

Course by Dr. Doron Navot

Course Paper

Lars Maurischat, LTC (DEU AAVN)

Book: 21 Lessons for the 21st Century

Yuval Noah Harari

Chapter 2: Work

Harari covers in his book 21 short analyses that covers what he considers being the most pressing issues we face today or might face in the future.

For this reason, his book is structured into 21 chapters which are grouped into five parts covering similar meanings.

This paper will focus on one of the chapters within the first part, the chapter 2 “Work”.

Harari starts by pointing the uncertainty of the future out. This includes the job market as well¹. Nevertheless, within this chapter he is focusing on the assumption, that due to technological development billions of people will become economically redundant². Those fears aren't anything new, a similar perspective could had been observed in the nineteenth century during the times of the industrial revolution³. Yet those fears hadn't materialized in this way. Even as a lot of jobs became obsolete due to the rising grade of automation other jobs were created within this time period resulting in a dramatically increase of the average live standard⁴.

Automatization a robotization aren't a new phenomenon. But according to Harari the near future change might be, that machines will not only perform physical work better than humans but also cognitive work. This has been deducted from the present state of technological development, especially within the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Harari is arguing, that AI can outperform humans even in tasks that favour humans⁵. On the other hand, rather than replacing humans entirely though, AI might actually help create new human jobs. Instead of humans competing with AI they could focus on servicing and leveraging AI. An interesting side note is that by arguing about the benefits of using AI technology within the sphere of transport and traffic, Harari is referring to the fact that close to 1.25 million people are killed annually by traffic accidents (twice the number killed bey war, crime and terrorism combined)⁶ and that excluding AI in the decision making process could save a lot of lives⁷.

¹ HARARI Yuval Noah, 21 Lessons for the 21st Century: 19

² HARARI Yuval Noah, 21 Lessons for the 21st Century: 19

³ HARARI Yuval Noah, 21 Lessons for the 21st Century: 19

⁴ WOIROL Gregory R., The Technological Unemployment and Structural Unemployment Debates: 18-20

⁵ HARARI Yuval Noah, 21 Lessons for the 21st Century: 20

⁶ World Health Organization, Global Status Report on Road Safety 2015

⁷ HARARI Yuval Noah, 21 Lessons for the 21st Century: 19

By 2050 not just the idea of a job for life but even the idea of a profession for life might seem ancient. However, Harari insists that many jobs are uninspiring drudgery not worth saving. Nobody's life dream is to be a cashier, says Harari. He goes on to say that "what we should focus on is providing for people's basic needs and protecting the social status and self-worth"⁸.

To solve the upcoming problem of unemployment the government could subsidize universal basic services rather than income. Instead of giving money to people who then shop around for whatever they want the Government might subsidize free education, free healthcare, free transport and so forth⁹. According to Harari, the Human happiness depends less on objective conditions and more on our own expectations. Our expectations adapt to changing conditions including to the condition of other people. When things improve, expectations balloon and consequently even dramatic improvements in conditions might leave us as a dissatisfied as before.¹⁰

Reflecting this chapter in Harari's book you could argue that he is following the Pluralism theory. Pluralism is often used in opposition to monism and dualism. Pluralism means in practice to realize and acknowledge multiple opinions, cultures and habits at the same time. This way of realizing and acknowledging can come in different forms, from tolerating the different opinion to understanding it as equal and protecting it actively. This emphasizes the difference to e.g. the Monism theory, which claims the truth with an exclusivity that can tend to ignorance, dogmatism or fundamentalism.

⁸ HARARI Yuval Noah, 21 Lessons for the 21st Century: 37

⁹ HARARI Yuval Noah, 21 Lessons for the 21st Century: 38

¹⁰ HARARI Yuval Noah, 21 Lessons for the 21st Century: 39f

The same phenomenon's that Harari is describing, can be examined through other philosophical lenses.

By looking at the same given facts and following the same assumptions the Marxist theory e.g. will provide different conclusions.

Marxism theory is focusing on materialism. According to this theory, in capitalist societies, class conflict arises due to contradictions between the material interests of the oppressed and exploited proletariat, that is considered a class of wage labourers employed to produce goods and services and the bourgeoisie which is considered the ruling class that owns the means of production and extracts its wealth through appropriation of the surplus product produced by the proletariat in the form of profit. This causes a class struggle between the classes that according to Marxist theory will culminate in a proletarian revolution based on the fight over the profit of the produced goods and in the logical deduction the fight over the ownership of the means of production itself. This revolution will lead to a socialist society with common ownership.

With this theoretical setup in mind the description of the possible future comes to a different conclusion. The by Harari described future might lead to different possible outcomes. It might end with the labour force or to use Marxist terminology the proletariat being reduced to uselessness, cause their capability of providing working power is not needed anymore. Which to further follow Marxism theory would present the peak of the class struggle.

Within the same predicted scenario, the result might form a more egalitarian system than ever known. Either cause of the possibilities provided, the reduced power of the bourgeoisie

and their possession of the means of production or the simple insignificance of mankind through to the total shift from production towards a data driven economy.

The same situation can, of course, be analysed following other theoretical approaches. Some might offer interesting food for thought.

Taking Elitism theory is an example. Following Harari's assumptions and his description of the future, one of the possible questions could be if the present elites would be the same within this setup. Would the upper class in the future be the same? Is the control over a society's means of production still as important or will this shift from production towards information and data?

The perspective the hole analysis is conducted is not the only possible critic. Of course, the future is not as predictable as it might seem by reading Harari's book. And further more to conclude from past developments might not turn out as predicted.

It is dangerous to assume that enough that enough new jobs will appear to compensate for any losses. The fact that this has happened during previous waves of automation is absolutely no guarantee that it will happen again under the very different conditions.

But even if disagreeing with a Harari's way of viewing the future, the arising questions about how will live look like in the decades and centuries ahead and what will give our lives meaning are not less important

Nevertheless, Harari isn't providing a satisfying answer how to solve the problems that might be ahead.