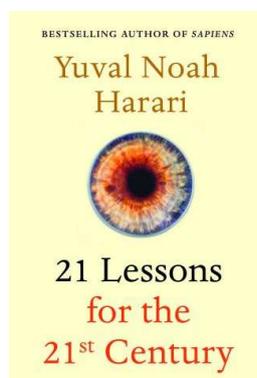


## BOOK REVIEW

**21 Lessons for the 21st Century**

Author: Yuval Noah Harari

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**Suzie Handajani**

Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

Email: [suzie\\_handajani@ugm.ac.id](mailto:suzie_handajani@ugm.ac.id)

*21 Lessons* is Harari's third book after *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*. These three books seemingly form a trilogy although each of them can be read individually. He has other publications but Harari is currently best known for these three books. He introduces *21 Lessons* by comparing it with the other two. *Sapiens*, says Harari, deals with human's past, while *Homo Deus* is about the future of humans. This leaves *21 Lessons* with the task of explaining the present.

Harari goes back and forth from the past to the present to tell us what has gone wrong in our contemporary society. Being a historian he has a penchant for details. His book is filled with historical events and contemporary social phenomena. Many of us will be familiar with the examples that he chooses in order to prove his point. What is surprising is his perspectives on these things. Reading his book I cannot help but ask myself, why did it not occur to me to see them from Harari's point of view when all this time the social phenomena have been staring at me in the eye. Let's see what he says in the book.

*21 Lessons* consists of 21 chapters. Although Harari says that this book is about how to deal with the present, the main theme of this book is actually the human mind. According to Harari, our present mind is an accumulation of the cultural journey of sapiens for 2.5 million years. So the human brain is biological, but the mind is cultural. Since the mind is a cultural product, it is vulnerable to power relations just like other forms of culture. Hence it will affect the way we see 'truth'. After evolving for 2.5 million years, are we getting smarter? Apparently not. Harari finds that the main product of the human mind in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is stupidity. He warns that, "We should never

underestimate human stupidity." (p. 179). There are two main products of the 'stupid' human mind in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the first one is Artificial Intelligence (AI). The second product is a string of twisted human logic.

The AI is not stupid *per se*. On the contrary, it is quite intelligent as the name suggests. However AI showcases the paradox of our intelligence. The human mind is so smart that it is able to create something even smarter than humans themselves. Hold on, this does not sound smart at all. Maybe this *is* stupid. Why would the human mind create something that would render the human mind itself obsolete? This is quite self-destructive if you think about it. A mindful suicide, in every sense of the word. Harari infers that humans use their intelligence to create things that would eventually renders their own mind useless. The reason for this is that humans surrender their power to make decisions to Artificial Intelligence. I cannot even decide which Youtube videos to watch without checking out the recommended section. This recommendation is algorithm, which is basically AI subtly making decisions on my behalf. Harari says that in the past, "... the masses revolt against exploitation." In the present, "... the masses fear irrelevance." (p.8). Humans are being made redundant by AI. People are being laid off their jobs because of the decisions made by their AI bosses who can calculate work efficiency more accurately than human bosses.

Where are humans lacking? Basically we lack speed. Again, this is our own fault and stupidity for creating something so fast like the computer. Harari claims that in the digital era the most important power is gained through "connectivity and updateability" (p. 22). Unfortunately humans are so slow to connect

and update ourselves, despite the fancy names that we give to these two skills, which are socialization and education. To connect, we mere humans need to socialize to create network. This takes a lot of time and patience, especially to gain other people's trust. To update ourselves we have a fancy institution called education and a fancy process called learning. A formal education from playgroup to doctorate program takes an average of 26 years. In contrast, what does AI have to do to connect and update itself? Just one thing: plug it in (p 22). It will connect itself with other AI and absorbs data in seconds. That is it. No fuss. No mess. Compared to AI, humans are just a bundle of inefficient nerves. No wonder we are being made redundant.

After AI, the second one on the list of human stupidity is twisted logic. We think that humans grow wiser after a total of 2.5 million years worth of practicing being humans. Unfortunately that is not the case. Harari is more than happy to provide us with cases to demonstrate this. In fact, I think the whole book is about staying sane amidst the inconsistent way of thinking that humans perpetuate to entertain both temporally and spatially.

The first sentence of the first chapter in *21 Lessons* says that, "Humans think in stories rather than in facts" (p.3). This opening statement is simple yet powerful as it echoes throughout the book. The implication of this argument is that humans will often neglect the logic (or lack thereof) of their social practices since the discourse (or the stories) that they make up is more believable than the empirical facts. I think the most striking example that Harari gives to prove this point is the one that pertains to religious practices. I find that his comments directed at religious practices are truly brave in the midst of rampant religious fundamentalism. I hope his book does not get banned because of this.

People tend to think that the link between truth and belief is causal: we believe in something because it is true. Unfortunately according to Harari, truth and belief are inversely related. He says that, "Often, strong beliefs are needed precisely when the story isn't true" (p. 204). The less evidence we have, the higher level of belief is required. The less data people have, the more stories people create. What happens next is that we have a group of powerful people who create stories, and another group of less powerful people who believe those stories. Does this sound familiar? Doesn't this dangerously sound like the practice of religion?

Eventually we can safely extrapolate that the less data people procure about God, the higher level of belief is required in order to maintain the existence of God. Harari asserts that, "The most fundamental characteristics of this mysterious God is that we cannot say anything concrete about Him" (p. 197). Harari also claims that the more religious we are, the more we think we know Him, "We know exactly what He thinks about fashion, food, sex and politics, ... He gets upset when women wear short-sleeved shirts, when two men have sex with one another, or when teenager masturbate" (p. 197). In other words, humans never run out of excuses to vilify other humans by using God as a backup. We never run out of ideas to do this, because humans are creative beings. Harari accordingly exposes the paradox of religious teachings on humility. If we are taught to be humble, then telling people that they are sinful is not humble at all because that means we are taking over God's job in passing judgment. Sadly we pass judgment all the time by bragging about our own religion. Harari argues that, "Most people tend to believe that they are the centre of the world, and their culture is the linchpin of human history" (p.181) and each religion believes that history starts with them (p. 181 – 196).

Harari goes on to question people's reluctance in changing or questioning their values simply because they have been handed down the said values for generations. This rings a bell in my tiny mind. It sounds so similar with Indonesian discourse of preserving traditional culture, which is purportedly inherited from our ancestors. Harari's comment is blunt yet on point: our ancestors are dead therefore we cannot ask them. We cannot consult them on whether the kind of values that we currently inherit is exactly the same with what they handed down (which is the point of preserving). And how far back do we want to trace our ancestors? Harari's point is that this is the condition of post-truth, where the power of stories decides the truth for us. In the case of preserving Indonesian culture, I think older generations are actively creating stories about *our* fear of losing *our* culture, which is actually *their* fear and *their* culture. Could it be that their fear is associated with losing power because the new digital culture is alien to them? The image of young and digitally savvy generation rendering them obsolete like digital dinosaurs must be daunting.

Now, back to Harari. After discriminating other people based on their religion, humans' stupidity continues. We never run out of ways to discriminate others. Racism is on the way to become outdated

because it is argued that you cannot discriminate against other people based on what they cannot change. Biology is not your destiny. So now people discriminate against something that they *can* force to change, which is culture.

People claim that they are not racists anymore but they morphed into something called culturists (p. 150). These new breed of culturists are the result of high level of human mobility and migration. When two groups of people with different cultural backgrounds collide, of course the collision will create a mixture of culture. However the process is far from innocent. People fight to hang on to their culture, which they claim to be the core of their identity. Who should change? I was here first, *you* go change. No, *you* change. And the fight continues. Ironically, Harari points out, that the thing which makes people want to learn other culture, is not migration but war. He says that war, "... makes people far more interested in one another" (p. 100). The US learned so much about Russian culture during the Cold War (p.100). Similarly, I think people overseas want to learn about Indonesia, because some of them silently agree that in the case of Indonesia going through another episode like the Bali Bombing, they could at least anticipate it. So they learn about Indonesia because it poses a threat, and here we have Indonesian people bragging that they want to learn because of the high culture of Indonesia. In a way this makes the Indonesians culturists.

So in the midst of this confusion, what should we do? Biologically humans live longer now, but how do we emotionally survive? There are two things that I learn from Harari's book: one, education is important; two, be mindful of your mind. Education, according to Harari, is not about providing information. The internet does it better. Education is about choosing bits of information and making decisions based on a well-informed mind (p. 261). Education institutions should also be at the forefront in teaching and demonstrating that changes happen all the time. Harari argues that, "Change is the only constant" (p. 259).

The last thing is making peace with our mind. Our mind has been neglected for a long time since AI has done a lot of thinking for us. Harari suggests meditation. However, since I am not keen on meditation I beg to conclude his book with a different interpretation of meditation. In order to be mindful of our mind, from Harari's book I conclude that we should take ample time to intellectually contemplate and "observe reality as it is" (p. 313). Do not let

"stories" cloud our minds. I think that is how Harari wrote this eye-opening and enlightening book. His book is what I usually call a "thinking book" for lack of better word. Other research might present a fresh set of data as part of its novelty. Harari's book on the other hand, does not present or produce a new set of data. He provides examples of social phenomena and historical events that we know already. The difference is that he invites us to give them a fresh outlook and new point of view.