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SOC 105

<center>Harari's Community Vs. Fligstein and MacAdams *Microfoundations*</center>

It is no secret that the twenty-first century has ushered in an unprecedented amount of technological advances and innovations at an incredibly fast rate. From smartphones, to drones, and even "smart" homes, it has become difficult for many humans today to live a life without the advantages and shortcuts that technology and the internet provides to us. At the very beginning of the semester, our class studied the very beginnings of the human consciousness and concept of "the self," and how oftentimes we are influenced and lifted up by the communities around us. In Chapter 5 of Harari's book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, he recalls these concepts of human beings needing close and intimate communities, and how technology has started to isolate and disintegrate such communities. This essay focuses on the basic ideologies Fligstein and MacAdams discuss in *Microfoundations*, and the origins of the "social" for modern humans, and how Harari applies such discussions to our increasingly technological world today.

In *Microfoundations*, Fligstein and MacAdams discuss how community building and collaborative activity were ideologies discovered to first be enacted around 45,000-50,000 years ago. This delay of such symbolic activity and cultural happenings from the first *Homo sapiens* nearly 200,000 years ago is said to be due to the lack of language and speech between fellow modern humans, which had not developed until later on. This development of language and speech allowed *Homo sapiens* to begin populating the globe and create respective communities and collective groups based on similar values, beliefs, and shared cultures. This onset of

across the earth that we are today. Without it, Fligstein and MacAdams suggest that we would still be the basic mammalian species stuck in Africa and the Middle East that we previously were for around 150,000 years.

This new concept of shared understanding and consciousness between humans caused a sudden creation of self awareness and, as Fligstein and MacAdams explain, "endowed humans with art, symbolic thought, and expanded reason but also new fears and threatening forms of awareness" (p. 41). Humans were now faced with existential questions that seemed unanswerable, beginning to question the real meaning of life outside of surviving. This rabbit hole of thought is still one not often discussed today, as it requires humans to reflect on life with an outsider perspective, which can create such a feeling of isolation and meaninglessness. In efforts to get away from these feelings of loneliness, modern humans began to rely on creating social groups and communities with shared values and ideologies. This is what Fligstein and MacAdams attribute as "the existential function of the social," saying, "Our daily lives are typically grounded in the unshakeable conviction that no one's life is more important than our own and that the world is an inherently meaningful place. [...] It is a collaborative product, born of the everyday reciprocal meaning making, identity conferring efforts we engage in with those around us" (p. 42).

This new need for communities and social groups, Fligstein and MacAdams argue, was very likely one of the direct causes of the creation of religions, cultures, rituals, and meaningful group activities and ways of life overall. Religion is one of the largest examples of this, as it is oftentimes used as a way for humans to provide answers to otherwise incomprehensible questions through the belief in a higher power, uniting a usually large group of people to combat

same "collective meaning making" efforts, uniting humans under the shared meanings behind acts such as burials, holidays, and more.

Fligstein and MacAdam's overarching meaning in *Microfoundations* is that modern humans require and rely on this existential function of the social in order to avoid feelings of isolation and meaninglessness that their newfound self awareness and consciousness causes them to be aware of. In the words of the authors, "It is precisely because modern humans need and are relentless in their efforts to fashion shared meanings (like Christianity) and identities (like being a Christian) to restrain existential doubt that these constructions are available to those (like capitalists) who would appropriate and exploit them for their own purposes" (p. 43). In short, language and speech allowed for the expansion of humans across the globe and creation of communities that give our lives meaning today. The forming of communities can be seen as being as necessary to the survival of humans as food or water. Without them, we as a species could begin to view life as having little to no meaning, destroying the foundations of humankind that have been built over the last 45,000-50,000 years.

In Chapter 5 of *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Harari discusses humans and community, and how the introduction of advanced technology has impacted such communities. Harari begins by highlighting Facebook's criticism of the breaking down of human communities over time, attributing it to "socio political upheavals of our time- from rampant drug addiction to murderous totalitarian regimes." These reasons, as well as technology largely contributing, have indeed led to less and less genuine communities being formed, as well as dividing and decaying existing communities. Harari discusses how humans are still deeply rooted and rely on Stone Age ideologies and characteristics first developed thousands of years ago. He says that humans

have the brain capacity or capability to fully know and connect with more than around 150 people.

The introduction of massive online communities and social media followings through technology and apps created a sort of whiplash effect for humans, quickly going from being a part of a few, smaller communities, to trying to amass as many likes and followers as possible, even if they are complete strangers. This is not only evident in the online realm, but in the increasingly divided world around us. Harari states, "The attempt to replace small groups of people who actually know one another with the imagined communities of brothers of nations and political parties could never succeed in full." These large groups that people are becoming more and more pressured to follow and contribute to oftentimes do the opposite of unification. Rather, increasingly larger connections tend to isolate humans further, as most of these communities and groups only come together on the surface level basis. Humans require deep, meaningful connection in order to feel that our lives have meaning, so superficial connections can make us feel the very opposite.

Harari expands on this idea in the "Online versus offline" section of Chapter 5, discussing how the online world has not only caused us to disconnect from real-world communities, but become detached to the world around us in general. Increasingly diving into online worlds through emails, interactive games, social media, and more causes people to desentize themselves from their surroundings in order to devote more attention to their screens Harari argues, "We are more interested in what is happening in cyberspace than in what is happening down the street. It is easier than ever to talk to my cousin in Switzerland, but it is

instead of at me."

Harari goes on to say that this disconnect from our very own bodies as humans is a large factor to feeling alienated and alone. He argues that technological businesses, such as Facebook, will only be able to prevent the worsening of this disconnection by encouraging people to spend as little amount of time online as possible, something that most companies would dread as it would lead to less profit. Many companies claim to have citizens' best interests at heart, and want to facilitate and increase connections between people through online sharing and communities, but Harari demonstrates this as being ineffective, and that pushing for more offline connection by such corporations would be the most beneficial. This brings us to the larger dilemma of which is more important to these companies, like Facebook: social change or profit?

Ultimately, Harari discusses the disadvantages of online communities and connections, lamenting the isolation and declining connections between humans outside of social media and instant messaging. These online relationships do not provide the same fulfillment that our human species requires in order to feel meaningful and a part of something larger than themselves.

These two concepts, Harari's discussion of human communities, and Fligstein and MacAdam's explanation of the "existential function of the social," go hand in hand. *Microfoundations* facilitate the discussion of the foundations of modern humans and their development of self-consciousness, leading to the necessity of social groups and collective meaning making activities and values between peoples. Harari directly discusses this concept in Chapter 5 of his book, stating that humans "are still Stone Age animals." We continue to rely on genuine human connection in order to give our individual lives meaning, a concept that first came into fruition nearly 50,000 years ago.

in the past when humans still depend on them significantly. Fligstein and MacAdams point out the same dilemma that Harari raises when speaking about the need for humans to unite in shared identities and traditions, citing how capitalism and corporations exploit this need by equating online social groups to offline intimate human connections. This can become a dangerous slope, as humans still very much rely on the same ideologies of small communities with in person, genuine relationships as they did all those years ago. Harari connects this reliance with our modern day world, bringing awareness to the need for separation between online and offline, and emphasizing the heightened importance for offline focus.

Harari does contradict Fligstein and MacAdams, however, when discussing how thinking as a group and following the collective consciousness can be harmful and cause a sort of blind loyalty. Fligstein and MacAdams solely discuss the beneficial factors of being a part of groups and communities as humans, as well as how religion is beneficial in the way that it contributed to the formations of such social groups. Harari, however, discusses how religion can be harmful to communities, as it creates a sense of superiority and one sided way of thinking. Such groups could isolate themselves in their beliefs, and criticize those who don't align with such beliefs. Fligstein and MacAdams tend to focus only on the beneficial and basic factors of forming groups, rather than looking at the bigger picture like Harari.

In conclusion, our world is advancing technologically at a rate that humans struggle to keep up with, and could someday make us and our needs obsolete. Isolating ourselves by placing more importance and focus on the online world can lead to humans lacking a person-to-person connection that was discovered to be an important aspect to survival nearly 50,000 years ago with the introduction of modern day humans. Without this connection, both Fligstein and

individual lives, further isolating and alienating themselves, which could lead to harmful declines in mental health, motivation, and ultimately the interconnections required to keep our society and world functioning.