

21st Century, 1st World Problems

21 Lessons for the 21st Century is a very interesting book by Yuval Harari. In many ways it encapsulates much of our current culture, that being nihilistic. "The Black Pill," as the kids call it these days, as opposed to the red pill and whatever other terms we came up with. In spite of its apocalyptic and sometimes conflicting style, I think there are some interesting points brought up in this book, especially in regards to culturalism and its differences to racism and automation in regards to Marx's vision of capitalistic society.

In human history, racism has been an integral problem - for as long as there have been two different groups of humans, there has been prejudice, and for much of civilization the most documented of these has been racism. In sociology, we mainly learned of the few facets of racism that are still around today in American culture, those being white privilege and racial formations. White privilege is the idea that those who are white are given better treatment most of the time in America from two points: the first being that they are seen both as the dominant race, and so are normal, and secondly bear none of the stigma of the minority race, not seen as foreign or other at all. Even if the one benefitting from white privilege are not aware of it, it does not change the fact - whether given privilege by closet racists or those who unconsciously prefer the same race as their own, they benefit from being seen as "normal," and in most situations are seen as trustworthy when compared to those who are different from the norm.

started participating in the slave trade, there was most likely some cognitive dissonance - many of America's early colonists were Christians, and slavery was not exactly condoned in the Bible. To get around this there were many ideas that were born and incorporated into the early American zeitgeist to justify it, with one of the most infamous ones being Africans were not fully human, so it was not really slavery. When slavery ended these ideas did not just vanish - they stuck around and evolved, and instead of rationalizing racism these ideas rationalize racialization, or the idea that there is a "superior" race and then the "other" races. These ideas can still be seen today, and Harari makes a very interesting, albeit logical shift in these ideas.

Much of Harari's book is taken from a global view - and that is important for discussing all of the issues as they are not just America's point of view on the issue, it is how the world will deal with these issues. When it comes to race, Harari makes an interesting distinction of what modern day and future prejudice will look like - culturalism. Culturalism is the belief that certain cultures are better than others, and in retrospect it makes sense to make this shift. Technically speaking there are not different "races" of humans - all humans on earth are all human. As Harari points out we know now more than ever that biological differences between the "races" do not exist, but from "brain scientists" to "behavioral economists," we as a species "have accumulated a wealth of data for the existence of significant differences between human cultures." So although we can say with the utmost confidence that genetically a European and a Saudi Arabian are the same, saying which culture is better is hard - because depending on the issue, there are clear winners and losers.

immigration to Germany rather than Saudi Arabia - doesn't that mean that Germany is, at least in the realm of immigration, culturally better than Saudi Arabia? Another example is the free speech found in America as opposed to China. American citizens can (and often do) openly criticize the American government with very little repercussion, whereas in China there are many cases of citizens disappearing for long spans of time following criticism, and they are the lucky ones. It is an interesting point that Harari brings up, and one that I believe although may seem an evolution of othering that was seen through racism, is actually contradictory.

Harari does not say that the racism of the past will disappear - on the contrary, he states that many of their outcomes live on now through culturalism. The racists of old will veil their racism behind culturalism, along with newfound culturalists who subscribe to the idea that their culture is dominant, better and as such should be adopted. Racism and culturalism are both ways to justify othering, and in that view Harari does not discredit modern racism. There is one main difference between culturalism and racism, and it is a difference of credibility. Racism has always been an issue in history, and in today's information age there are many facts that show racism has no scientific merit. What does appear to have merit is culturalism, and that leaves the future in quite the predicament. One issue without scientific standing is being replaced by another that does have ample scientific standing. So although it serves a similar purpose to racism, it is a very different beast that is perched on much sturdier ground as opposed to its predecessor. On the other hand one idea that is similar is Marx's ideas of estranged labour, caused by no other than capitalist innovation.

humanity. On one hand the increased efficiency gained from automation will be monumental, the only thing to really rival it being the potential loss in all of the fields that it could take over. Menial labor is the obvious casualty, but with machine learning there are many possible fields that can be learned and taken over - from lawyers to bankers, no job is really safe. This is because humans are ultimately living computers, with predictable inputs and outputs, and given enough time it seems likely that computers can take over any job that humans do with the utmost efficiency. In short though jobs will be lost, with first menial labor jobs and then - well it seems like the sky's the limit. One interesting result from automation though is the relationship it has to capitalism and communism. If a major portion of the population will eventually find themselves out of work, then the current economic systems will have no counter measures.

Both capitalism and communism operate under the assumption of human capital. Capitalism is based on individual ownership, that each person is entitled to what they work. You get out what you put in. Communism on the other hand sees the economy from a more zoomed out, governmental view, where everyone works for the good of everyone. As Marx so famously puts it, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." If you were to take out workers from that though, what are you left with? The answer is nothing as Harari points out. Communism was an answer to the exploitation of rampant capitalism, but no work means no exploitation. "How do you start a working-class revolution without a working class?" This may seem like a counter to Marx - that ironically enough, it was not communism that killed capitalism but capitalism

noted during the paradigm shift of his own generation.

Marx was alive during the shift of self-sufficient village life to bustling cities and specialization of jobs. Workers went from knowing the whole blacksmithing process of ironworking multiple tools to being in factories, doing one process to make the same tool for hours at a time. Marx lamented over many of the losses of workers from this shift - from the worker not owning what it was they were creating (going to the owners of the factories) to the worker not benefitting from the product of the work. He has become estranged in the literal sense - what was once someone's craft for their life, what they would spend years developing and perfecting, labors of love for many, instead became work as we know it today - something you have to do for a paycheck. There were different dimensions of alienation of the worker - from the process via specialization, to the lack of a finished product for the worker, to the lack of camaraderie with your coworkers. In this same way, automation is again estranging us from labour - without a job, there really isn't any process, product or anything. We have become so far removed from labour that we are practically divorced from it.

In conclusion, Harari brings up two points on culturalism and its relation to racism and automations effect on the economic climate of the world. Culturalism is similar in that it has the same end goal as racism, both dividing groups of people based on origin, but culturalism has a much firmer stand in science, making it an issue that may grow to be even worse than racism in our increasingly global world. Automation seems to be on track to destroy economic systems as we have known them, an echo of from Marx's early days as to the loss of the worker. But not all is loss - if there is one thing humans

we deal with a more destructive age, the problems we face are more of the same.