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Book Review

Yual Noah Harari, '21 Lessons for the 21st Century'

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INTRODUCTION

As one of the best-selling authors, Yuval Harari takes us through a fascinating journey of the major lessons for the 21st century. His earlier books, Homo Sapiens and HomoDeus, have been global bestsellers and virtually taken him to stardom. The present book under review covers an array of pressing and daunting topics from God and religion to democracy, liberty, equality, justice, education, health, post-truth, nationalism, secularism, immigration, terrorism, technologyand climate change. These are big issues of the times. In that sense, Harari's book **'21 Lessons For the 21st Century'**, takes the reader through a journey of mankind from the past to the present and the future. The book on the one hand celebrates human wisdom and on the other worries about human follies. The present review will notcover all the major themes in the book. Rather it will focus on the challenges that biopolitics and techno politics poses to the liberal order and even the decline of democracies.

The impact of the infotech and biotech revolution impacts on state and society in a variety of ways. Harari opines that artificial intelligence (AI) could erase some of the advantages of a democracy by impacting on the ideals of liberty and equality. The liberal story is also flawed and it does not fully reflect the truth of humanity. Nationalist and religious fanatics pose a serious challenge to the liberal order, along with all that is now happening in the world of biopolitics and techno politics. To quote Harari: "Ancient problems of philosophy are now becoming practical problems of engineering and politics".

Harari argues in his book that 'free will' is not necessarily a reality. This is partly due to the images of illiberal democracies. The world lives in the myth of freedom, since walls and firewalls are back in vogue. Moreover, with

advancing technologies and strategies, governments and corporations will soon get to know us better than ourselves. What worries Harari are the encroachments into our privacy.

Harari argues that though as humans we make our choices, yet they are not necessarily independent choices. To hack a human mind only two support systems are required. One a good understanding of biology and two a good computing mind. Algorithms could decide our likes and dislikes and accordingly decide the type of data that needs to catch our eye, even if it were bereft of credibility.By getting access to our inner thoughts, it will provide a lever for the hackers and the propagandists and manipulators. This could have commercial and electoral implications too. Artificial Intelligence (AI) could adversely impact on the economic power and social value that humans have, which in turn impacts on any government. AI could erase many of the practicaladvantages of being a democracy. In fact, even biases can be built into the algorithms. Harari worries that technology can even create the possibility of digital dictatorships. As Harari rightly observes "it is tempting to turn to the experts, but how do you know they are not just following the herd?" The problem with 'groupthink ' and 'ignorance' is that it seems to bedevil politicians, intellectuals, civil society activists, bureaucrats, customers, voters and even CEO's.

In the 20th century the masses revolted against exploitation, whereas now masses fear the possibility of irrelevance. Harari contends that when computer engineers write codes, in reality they shape human lives. This is where ethical codes also become important. Questions that primarily belonged to the Philosophy department are now at the doorstep of the Computer Science departments. The fundamental question raised is 'how can liberal democracies function in an era when governments and corporations can hack humans? Perhaps we are even entering a phase when we may have to question the fundamental assumptions of liberalism. In this context, perhaps the time has come to even understand the limitations of a liberal democracy. Though the liberal values are common, they could mean different things in different social, economic, political and cultural contexts.

Life in the 21st century according to the author demands "mindfulness' i.e., the need to get to know ourselves better, and also to see how we could make a difference in the life of the other. He tries to makes sense of where we have come from and where we are heading for. As Bill Gates says Harari is such a stimulating writer, that even if one may disagree on some of his arguments, yet one would like to continue reading and thinking.

Hararieschews fancy words and phrases and provides us a pragmatist view of the times. He is definitely not a pessimist as some critics and skeptics argue. Some skeptics argue that his books are not 'Lessons'. All the same, they are eyeopeners, which can be ignored only at one's peril. That's precisely why Harari's books are all bestsellers.

The biotech and infotech revolutions though important, are still in their infancy and perhaps it is too early to suggest that it would make liberalism and liberal values redundant. Data by itself may not be a problem. Rather it is a question what one wants to do with the data. Harari's arguments cannot be dismissed and needs to be taken a relative sense. As much as technology can be a threat, it has also been a source of citizenship empowerment. However, the challenges that AI poses to democracies and liberal values cannot be dismissed altogether. The fact is that they are already being experienced. Democracies are always under threat because they need a variety of preconditions to make it succeed. These preconditions are always under the scanner. In that sense democracies are more fragile and precarious than at any time earlier. We are constantly in a situation of having to imagine, recreate and rediscover democracy. Harari has tried to make sense of these pressing issues of our times, and there is never a dull moment in his book.