

Review Essay

Democracy and Humanity in the Twenty-first Century

Books Discussed:

Gwynne Dyer
War: The New Edition
Toronto: Random House, 2010

Gwynne Dyer
Growing Pains: The future of democracy (and work)
London, UK: Scribe, 2018

Yuval Noah Harari
Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow
London, UK: Harvill Secker (Random House), 2016

Yuval Noah Harari
21 Lessons for the 21st Century
Toronto, Canada: Signal, a division of Penguin Random House Limited, 2018

Andrew Keen
The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet Is Killing Our Children
New York, NY: Currency (Doubleday), 2007

Andrew Keen
The Internet is Not the Answer
New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2015

Andrew Keen
How to Fix the Future: Staying Human in the Digital Age
New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2018
Nassim Nicholas Taleb. 2010. *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*.
New York, NY: Random House, 2010.

Clive Thompson
Smarter Than You Think: How Technology is Changing Our Minds for the Better. New York,
NY: Penguin Group, 2013

By Donald R. Officer

The conclusions both authors draw in these curiously personal surveys of what might be called our current situation, are not radically different. Of course, as Yogi Berra observed,

“Prediction is difficult, especially about the future.” So, there’s a prudent amount of hedging in both works. Tone, focus and precise positioning are where their differences become apparent.

Dyer is well known to the Canadian public as a seasoned observer of conflict throughout the world where he maintains multiple listening posts. In his earlier work, *War* first published in 2004 then revised for rerelease in 2010, this journalist and consultant delved deeply into one aspect of Harari’s world – the sweeping landscape of human history and more speculatively, that which came before. However, with recent surprises springing from archaeology, genetics and neuroscience to assault once educated guesses about our distant ancestry, off hand wagering about human nature is not quite as free range as it was. When Dyer states his belief that serious conflict is an unpleasant byproduct of civilization, itself made possible by settled agriculture, he invokes an Edenic image of a long past noble savagery.

Of course, hunter gatherers had neither time nor resources to build formidable war machines. Nevertheless, taking down the large mammals that once roamed the unfrozen continents was pretty good training for horrendous hand to hand combat. Moreover, new archaeology supplemented by Mitochondrial DNA and the evidence of recent practices among isolated peoples in places like New Guinea or Borneo where neighbors unwillingly contributed themselves to either the trophy shelf or the larder has revealed a frightful picture of mass slaughter of fighting age men. These early “skirmishes” drastically reduced humanity’s gene pool in those idealized idyllic hunter gathering days. Then as now, the “other” counts for little.

Nevertheless, Dyer and Harari agree correctly as the science confirms, that the peasantry superseding nomadic bands had it tougher in many other ways. The farmer’s lifestyle meant the average adult lifespan was ten percent shorter than that of the hunter gather. Early settlers toiled for way longer hours risking periodic famine, arbitrary taxation by local tyrants, occasional rape and pillage. Proof of this decline lies in both the ruins and eventually the recorded accounts of those good old days. Our two writers are also on the same page about the relative obsolescence of total war between nations in our own times. International combat used to be profitable for clear winners. It’s now too expensive to launch unsolicited attacks. Notwithstanding, both authors advise strategic caution. One of Dyer’s chapters is entitled, “Don’t touch that button!” While Harari’s 11th “Lesson” is “War: *Never Underestimate Human Stupidity.*”

Both men regard the future of work as more problematic. Harari has written a whole other book, *Homo Deus*, expanding on the bleak scenario where humans are rendered largely obsolete by the rise of automation and artificial intelligence. Coupled with the machines’ rapidly emerging abilities to replace our labor is the installation of the surveillance state amplified by the disempowering effect of astronomic income discrepancies. Other writers have strongly supported arguments for this eventuality predicting a meritocratic aristocracy further entrenching itself as it builds an impenetrable wall around the untouchable .01%. We are actually close to realizing this outcome already as a continuing intergenerational cycle as the elite are fed the royal jelly privilege produces and quite naturally intermarry. According to Harari, this might look something

like the end of history Francis Fukuyama wrote about in the rosy nineties, except that it resembles a dismal dystopia for most of us, not the consumer nirvana widely anticipated a few short years ago.

I've seen both men speak and each projects a distinctive attitude reflected in their respective bodies of work. Gwynne Dyer is a warm, optimistic type who puts an audience at ease even when talking about the grimmest of topics. He breezily assured us for example that even after all-out nuclear war "a few breeding pairs" would survive to begin anew. Yuval Harari by contrast is a slight, nervous looking speaker who concedes the same point about survival, but quickly reminds us that since preceding generations have already exhausted much of the world's resources, any post nuclear generations would be exceedingly hard pressed to achieve anything like what we now recognize as prosperity. Despite the sharp temperamental distinction, the two authors are not that far apart. The glass is half full and half empty.

Of course, the two writers also have their own hobby horses. Harari, as noted above is pretty pessimistic about how automation will be introduced. He observes a downward spiral of technological horrors starting with disillusionment about the future through mass unemployment, loss of privacy and ending with a scarcely imaginable socioeconomic money and power gap between the very few and the billions of have nots. Gwynne Dyer puts stock in an interim guaranteed annual income as a stop gap with a longer-term solution ultimately quite attainable.

These sanguine prognoses may represent a healthy optimism, but I expressed my misgivings to him about our ability as a society to reverse the crushing burden of an economic system that drives relentlessly forward like a runaway treadmill until whole populations, classes and ecologies burn out across the board. Where are the brakes? Who will create the impetus, the momentum of serious reform? I found myself unwilling to accept either Dyer's belief that something will turn up nor Harari's gloomy fatalism.

Harari is a dedicated practicing agnostic. He expresses his skepticism in both religious and secular senses. He believes collective sanity requires the peoples and nations of the world had better disabuse themselves of their entirely unjustified self-importance quick and soon. He declares at the start of his book that clarity is a very important part of the cure we all need in these ambivalent times. Dyer seems to believe that the confusion in values that besets us now might actually give us appropriate pause staying many hasty hands. The two tendencies suggest opposing attitudes, but we could benefit from understanding both of their approaches.

Here's why. On the first page of his introduction, Harari states his intention in writing this book as an attempt to bring clarity to the discussion about the future of our species. In so doing he hopes also to empower more people to join the debate. Dyer seeks similar ends through a balanced discussion of the threats posed by populism and the extreme right. Inequality and the looming job losses created by technological innovation are in their crosshairs. As mentioned above, Harari, perhaps partly because he is a historian, an Israeli or openly gay, sees a broader, more sinister threat posed by artificial intelligence. After all, he has taken the long, long view as the author of the best-selling *Sapiens*, a history of our entire species – not always a pretty vista. Following that up with *Homo Deus*, he projected a picture of a future where new technology

served atavistic impulses. And let's not forget, that despite its roots in an idealistic version of Zionism, today's Jewish homeland is also the poster child of the modern surveillance state.

As for Gwynne Dyer, his Canadian origins prepped him for a tolerant mindset, but his *métier*, the study of war, did not automatically direct his feet to the sunny side of the street. However, an interesting thing did happen to him as he traversed the battlefields. Warfare, he could see, at least on a massive, civilization destroying scale has been in steady decline since 1945. Will this reduction in the frequency of armed international conflicts continue? There's little appetite for it on the world stage. As mentioned above, the ROI and sunk costs in the preparation stage are not attractive to most governments. America has been the glaring exception. The USA is still the biggest arms producer with the added advantage of extensive domestic consumption of small arms (and up if you include law enforcement acquisitions) mostly thanks to the country's peculiar constitution. Americans think differently about conflict.

Despite their having box seats to the world's fire fights or deep knowledge of the possibilities, and despite Harari in particular having a near contemptuous opinion of his own species, these authors seem too optimistic given all the other most likely scenarios. Like Steven Pinker, author of *Enlightenment Now*, the direction even of civil unrest seems to be veering away from heavily armed response on all sides. Syria might be a nearly unique anomaly. Even African blood that once colored waters across the continent now flows far less freely.

Yet there are more new appalling tools available to oppressors than ever before. As a doctor once told me, "If a man breaks a leg, everyone is sympathetic. If he loses his soul nobody notices." Where will all the new neuroscience and manipulative tools of social media finally take us? What unique torments will AI as cause or consequence bring forth? Dyer believes the disruptions of job loss and deindustrialization will be managed by some or other form of guaranteed income – at least eventually. Harari is in solid agreement about the immediate need for a guaranteed basic income but adds a sense of urgency that stems from the growing risks accompanying a rapidly widening divide. He also seems to imply that failing any redistribution, by default the tools of institutional oppression, cultural diversion and outright fear mongering might well bridge any transitions to greater stability if we do not address the inequality crisis.

Whatever the morality, isn't a guaranteed income really a band aid solution, social triage at best? Once dignity is gone from the shelves, the real stock of our little shop of horrors becomes increasingly evident. When I met Dyer a few weeks ago, I asked him if he had any thoughts about the neo liberal economic policies that prefer for-profit investment over public good and which most of the world has felt compelled to adopt since the post war years more equitable socio-economic order was erased in the late seventies. This new approach has grown the economy, but simultaneously placed almost all the benefits in the hands of the few.

In response to my question, Dyer told me he thought the highly divisive and lopsided neo-liberal system that 99% of us now toil under is overdue for a complete makeover. Maybe, but the one percent had a scare during the protests of the sixties. Once the powers that continue to be regained a firm grip on the wheel after the demonstrations culminating in 1968, they began to systematically institute a "never again" skein of policies. The establishment response after those

momentous years resembled the authoritarian states of Europe who clamped down hard and heavy after the 1848 protests. Populism is both a manifestation of and reaction to disorder.

Despite the objections of the majority, the regulatory framework of the IMF and other international economic agreements has forced nations to damage our common ecological inheritance, impoverishing local communities while making globalization a dirty word. But the story of nations is choppy and varied; live long enough and you'll see deliberate degradation is the usual vector of misery and inequality. As noted earlier in this review, balance and clarity are healthier responses than the confusion or anger we might otherwise give vent to. Certainly, there are core factors which division and populism may exacerbate and be exacerbated by. Yet each issue has an impetus of its own. Some are concrete and existential. Others are process related, impactful nonetheless for being indecipherable byproducts of complexity. The point to be made here is that although these two books are about the social world we have created and individual responsibility within that world, not discussing more fully the consequences of, for example, resource profligacy and pollution in the human context at least, is puzzling to the reader. They don't and in retrospect I'm surprised too. In fairness though, Harari and Dyer do remind us that we've become a single world-wide civilization. If we mess up this time, there'll be no do overs.

I simply don't fathom how Dyer especially can suggest that what's been willfully created since the start of the eighties will just run its course. Will the one percent suddenly see the light or the hacks in government discover some vestige of courage? The so-called meritocratic elite will surely be there to defend their affluent masters to the last drop of middle- and lower-class blood if need be. Money and power: the mechanisms that led to now unprecedented concentrations of both are not mysterious although many of them were developed on the sly and pushed through by unscrupulous lobbyists. Negligent of so many public necessities, the political and corporate fathers of this fraudulent situation, will not be easily defeated, so well did they build their legal and financial bulwarks. As of now, few would foresee a Hollywood ending.

Maybe Gwynne Dyer and Yuval Harari are fully aware of the current structures that make globalism so unattractive in so many corners of the globe. Maybe they realize populism didn't materialize out of pure spite or on a whim. Or maybe they are so committed to secular rationalism they do not realize others have neither the leisure nor resources that come from living off the dispensation of a fast fading enlightenment. To be reasonable, clear-sighted or to frame a balanced outlook you have to have something to be reasonable, clear-sighted or balanced about. For way too many of today's citizens the future looks too dark and murky for any of that.

There are other problematic icebergs in the frosty seas we are navigating. Mass migration has only subsided temporarily as the response toughens. Trump appears laughable in his rants about the caravans of refugees approaching the Mexican border, but the causes of mass flight around the globe are deep and intractable. "We ain't seen nothing yet."

You may be familiar with the writing of Nassim Nicholas Taleb. Growing up in Lebanon's civil war, he learned innumerable ways to expect the unexpected. An investor anticipating disruption, he published *The Black Swan* in 2007, the first of a trilogy that has itself become the hallmark of disruption. Black swans take shape as phenomena we spot more and more every day. They symbolize occurrences which are consequential, unforeseen and entirely

predictable – after the fact. While Gwynne Dyer describes Donald Trump as a “giant orange canary” referencing the traditional safety alarm system for coal miners, he could have as easily described the abrupt course change Trump’s election embodies, as a black swan. Whatever else you might say about predicting big change, nobody ever foresees the full force of what it brings. Dyer and Harari could have worked a little harder to import that power of uncertainty into the calculus.

The organization of society is also shifting as we ourselves adjust, driven by communications technology, accelerating change, radical new science and exposure to extreme risks never before imagined. Rapid change and reaction are the order of the day. Life becomes more exhilarating and riskier. The all-purpose internet is revolutionary and trivializing at the same time. Lacking the wisdom to fix its accompanying problems, we aren’t really ready for its gifts. On the upside, some authors like Canadian Clive Thompson have written books like his perceptively conceived 2013 work, *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology is Changing Our Minds for the Better* detailing multiple new forms of powerful literacy that we, or at least our children and grand children are acquiring at rapid fire rates. Harari recognizes the effect but suggests the positive aspects of the human computer interface are probably temporary. Soon, he claims, the machines will not need us for anything and may not even bother to share. Maybe.

Another interesting writer who has been publishing for roughly the past dozen years is Andrew Keen. Originally an emphatic internet skeptic, he published *The Cult of the Amateur* in 2007. As the title suggests, he did not look forward to the mangling and cheapening of thought and word about to pollute our screens as the internet became all inclusive. He was not wrong. Creative destruction is upon us. You might have to be smarter than you think as described in Thompson’s research. Yet, as Harari observes in his “Ignorance” chapter, the never-ending market-oriented revisions and continuous dumps of dubious text attest that you also know less than you think. In 2015 Keen released *The Internet is Not the Answer*. He remained skeptical as he surveyed the painful desolation of a once valued literate culture. Nevertheless, he began to show a hopeful tilt towards recovery. In his 2018 title, *How to Fix the Future* we discern his old cheekiness, not without a measure of justification. However, here he discusses the possibility of redemption as we master those new tools and literacies Thompson unpacks in his analysis.

Most notably in his chapter on education, Keen suggests our obsolete system produces mixed results at best. He believes despite that inconsistency, we might still produce worthy outcomes by learning to be good persons and conscientious student/citizens. Harari surveys much the same outdated, crumbling spectacle. The best strategy he can offer any would be learners is to outrun the sinister forces of entrapment seeking their unmitigated exploitation. Dyer has no specific ideas or comforting sections for students. Maybe he is just being realistic, presuming benign neglect could be the best approach to schooling in turbulent times. On balance, he might conjecture our kids will probably muddle through.

We all remember the boring compulsiveness of school. I know there were many periods and moments of real fun, accomplishment and relief as well. Keen seems to favor something like the high concept individuality of the Waldorf school. As might Dyer and Harari when you come down to it. In uncertain times the intellectual’s reflexive response is greater freedom to explore as a learning style. Ironically, structure may actually be better than openness at relieving the nasty

stress of the unknown. As kids we all wished for endless recess. That might have backfired had it come to pass. When considering any guaranteed income scheme for either the displaced masses or ourselves, let's think carefully about what we're wishing for.

Both Dyer and Harari are serious observers of humanity and its challenges, but they are obviously not without their biases. Harari, for example, fills many pages laying out his jaundiced views on organized religion, nationalism and “culturalism” – namely, the practice of selective personal discrimination. For now, our deteriorated situation with all its attendant damage to the ecology, social justice and simple human decency is neither ripe nor rotten enough to force the remedies the times cry out for. Powerful leaders and gatekeepers tend to be morally indifferent, certainly lazy. Although our precarious circumstances demand immediate universal coordination, generally speaking only the low hanging fruit of opportunism still tends to be picked.

About the Author:

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