

## Book review

*Homo Deus. A Brief History of Tomorrow* by Yuval N. Harari. London: Harvill Secker, 2016, pp. 448.

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## Keywords

Human Enhancement; Politics of AI; Post-humanism

*Homo Deus* addresses the pathway to a superhuman transition through human enhancement, where narratives of religion, war, equality, and freedom are coupled with the concrete implications of new godlike technologies such as artificial intelligence and genetic engineering. Composed by three parts, the book starts from an analytical approach to the Anthropocene era (Part I: *Homo Sapiens* Conquers the World), over the turning point of modernity (Part II: *Homo Sapiens* Gives Meaning to the World), until the next stage of evolution (Part III: *Homo Sapiens* Loses Control).

The opportunity to change history begins with preemptive conditions about the coming end of the historical course of *Homo Sapiens* due to the attempt to merge humanity with new technologies. The unique ability of humans to assert dominion over all other animals belonged to a very sophisticated cooperation on an imagined order, beyond objective and subjective realities or myths about war, gods, corporations, and politics. Modernity was the promise of unprecedented power within a complete renunciation to all these beliefs. The antidote to this meaningless view has been provided by humanism: a quasi-perfect potion composed by a large variety of intellectual, emotional, and physical experiences. Humanism enabled us to answer all ethical questions, even if the sanctification of life, emotions and desires undermines its very foundations by unleashing new post-humanist technologies. Organisms are algorithms, so replicating life and reality does not seem Sisyphean. While the usefulness of humans as unique individuals faces emergent *upgraded* superhumans, liberal assumptions are thwarted by three principles of life sciences: (1) humans are "dividuals" composed of many different and networked algorithms; (2) the algorithms constituting

a human are not free; (3) it follows that algorithms are always right because they know humans much more than humans can ever know themselves. Consequently, “beauty will be in the calculation of the algorithm” (328-29).

The success of liberalism consisted in ascribing value to individuals in the spheres of politics, economy and war, but financial flows and trade are managed by computer programs, in warfare soldiers are being replaced by autonomous robots, and democratic elections face algorithmic predictions about opinions and desires, undermining free will with a barrage of computational propaganda. The post-liberal world consists of worshiping data flow as a value for understanding any phenomenon through its contribution to data processing. Taking place in science labs, the new religion of *Dataism* finds the parameters to guarantee eternal life and happiness, i.e. chemical and electric stimuli to the point of continuous orgasm. As a consequence, death is a technical problem, and it is no longer possible for any actor to physically win a war. Whoever controls the data process, a new social contract will be signed; in order to gain immortality, humanity loses its free will by abandoning the human-centric world view in favor of a data-centric one, destroying basic foundations of liberal democracy: “What’s the use of having democratic elections when the algorithms know how each person is going to vote?” (392).

Although dystopian claims about technology are becoming popular to a large audience and the book is written in an engaging style, Harari seems to primarily target academics and experts who are shaping the tech-driven world, in order to define a new human agenda. An innovative point concerns the method of investigation of the author, who as a historian envisions the future not based on the lessons of history but on a predictive discourse about concrete developments of new technologies and life sciences, emphasizing the idealistic perspective of the human-centric premise. The analytical exploration across disciplinary boundaries focuses on the possibilities of future scenarios, and relies on a wide range of empirical examples from art to observation of political phenomena and processes through technological advancements. A basic critique might point out two fundamental questions. Firstly, the undue faith in progress is not likely to improve the form of government. On the contrary, it produces hegemonic control by states or even by high-tech corporations. Secondly, the disregard for the factors affecting power and, in turn, for the correlation between power and the post-human destiny does not take into account the idealized harmony of individual interests with the interests of humanity. Although Harari describes the future as the capacity to balance technological capabilities and visionary suggestions, the rise of the new species, a form of cyborg-elite, *homines dei*, will provide deeper cleavages. If war is of a dialectic nature between opposing wills escalating to the extreme, the struggle for the *beautiful* creation of *Homo Deus* would exacerbate the algorithmic race, giving rise to new forms of war, from hybrid wars to cyberwar. In

this view, conflicts are all but obsolete and technology is the most useful instrument for strengthening divisions. Humans use it merely to satisfy their endless *animus dominandi*.