

Midcoast Senior College
Fall 2020

Bewitched, Beguiled and Bewildered: Finding Ourselves in the 21st Century

F. Cichocki (drsciis@myfairpoint.net)

Course Catalog Description:

“There is a brave new world looming ahead and we see it only through the glass, darkly. Despite their promise of a brighter future, Big Data, Deep Algorithms and Super AI, working together systematically may be on the verge of making many of us obsolete, irrelevant, or at best members of a redundant social class. Infotech and biotech, conspiring with each other and the market, seem to be racing headlong, out of control, toward a destination unknown. Fake news, disinformation, propaganda, groupthink, etc., herald a new post-factual age in which anything goes. The rise of Nationalism (and Terrorism) imperils both our liberty and privacy. Global ecology has been brought nearly to its knees by human enterprise, and ironically we ourselves are caught up in its throes and don’t know what to do about it.

Is God now surely dead? What of morality, ethics, justice, and fairness in a world where everything is globalized and societies are becoming homogeneous? Is it time to rethink traditional education? Traditional religion? Are we entertaining ourselves to death? Does liberal democracy have a future? Has the market (and/or authoritarianism) supplanted democracy? Will we soon become just another BIT in the BIG DATA collective? Is a human-AI chimera (THE Singularity) on our horizon (& if so how soon)? How will we deal with our grave existential crises as a species: Ecological collapse, uncontrolled disruptive technologies, all out global war...? What will be our new defining story-- as a society, as a culture, as a species-- as we are reimagined/reshaped (&by whom) in the 21st Century, and beyond?” Text: Harari, Yuval Noah. 2018. 21 Lessons for The 21st Century. Spiegel & Grau, New York.

This course is the third in a trilogy inspired by the widely acclaimed books of historian Yuval Harari (*Sapiens*, 2015; *Homo Deus*, 2017; *21 Lessons for The 21st Century*, 2018), exploring the past and future of humanity. Here, we gaze into our cloudy crystal ball for a glimpse of our potential selves in the unfolding 21st Century.

By nature and design, this should be a free-wheeling, conversation-driven class, with (hopefully) just enough presentation and, of course, Harari’s thought provoking commentary, to catapult us into lively discussion. After all, we don’t know exactly what the future will bring, but we do know that change is inevitable and that history, since our origin as a species, has been shaped largely by a series of revolutions that have come with an accelerating pace, but one to which we have pretty well adjusted. So, we might expect that the future will just follow suit. Yet, as we progress through the 21st Century, truly cataclysmic and almost unimaginable changes are already on the horizon, and may be upon us before we realize what’s actually happening. As Harari says, “If... it sounds like science fiction, it is probably false. ...if...it doesn’t sound like science fiction—it is certainly false.” Our collective past experience as a species probably will not be a reliable guide for dealing with such a future. Who knows, when the “wizard” starts pulling levers and pressing buttons, we may not even know where the curtain is, let alone how to look behind it.

In the Fall of 2020, we find ourselves in a bizarre new reality, more or less controlled by the constraints of the Covid19 pandemic. As a result, Midcoast Senior College is forced to operate in a radically different format, entirely online. I’ll say it up front: The *Zoom* platform has many shortcomings and does not lend itself very well to my style of explorational education. Regardless, it is what it is and we have no choice but to make it work as best we can. And, that will require our collective openness, patience and understanding as we move forward with faltering steps (at least at first).

The way I see each class period unfolding is, at the beginning, to address any comments, insights, burning questions, etc. arising from reading Harari, previous classes (or, really anywhere else), and then to proceed with an exposition, usually in the form of a visual presentation (powerpoint) coordinated with the current week's topics, with frequent stopping for comments and questions. The Zoom platform offers various mechanisms to facilitate orderly responses from individual class members ("hand raising", "sharing", etc). (For the record, I'd prefer a free for all, but that wouldn't work very well with Zoom.) There's also a Zoom feature that we may use called "Breakout Room", that allows for multiple, concurrent, small group discussions. Anyway, we'll play it by ear, and tune it as we go. Doug Bates (our classmate and Zoom co-host) and I will be on hand 15 minutes before class to welcome you as you arrive. If you want to bring up issues then, feel free, but anything important for the whole class to hear should probably wait until everyone has formally joined the session.

ASSIGNMENT PRIOR TO THE FIRST CLASS (September 18): Please have read the Introduction to Harari (21 lessons...), and, if you're so inclined, Chapter 1. Also, since I think it is important of have some sense of Harari as a living human being, and a flesh and blood partner engaged in our adventure together, enter a Google search, "Yuval Harari at Google" and watch the YouTube video called, "21 Lessons for the 21st Century Yuval Noah Harari talks at Google". (There are many such conversations with Harari available online. Feel free to explore.)

PROVISIONAL COURSE FLOW*

Week 1 (9/18): Introductions: Getting to know one another. What to Expect: The Flow and tailoring the course to your collective interests; Navigating the Zoom platform. More?

Week 2 (9/25): **Technology run amuck? : A lot of shakin' in the old corral.**

The Future: Dr. Pangloss or Candide? Magic and seductiveness of InfoTech. Does all technology have a "hidden agenda"(if only we could only see it)? How to keep from becoming hostage to such an agenda? What's our ongoing existential narrative? What will it mean to be human by Century's end? What will become of individual meaning and worth? Satisfying work and occupation-- or obsolescence and redundancy?: A New Classism: Technocrats vs. Global Useless Class. AI: Mind/consciousness in the Machine? (Is your "Smartphone" (or Siri, Alexa, Echo, etc.) conscious? Does it matter?) Do you have responsibilities/obligations to AI machines (do they have any to you)? Me, Cyborg: The SINGULARITY is almost here (Elon Musk's "Nuralink"). Community and personal relationships in the future of Chatbots, Friendbots, Lovebots, Sexbots,... Menage a trois: Infotech, Biotech and The Market. "we maybe fast approaching a new singularity, when all concepts that give meaning to our world—me, you, men women, love, hate—will become irrelevant." (Harari).

Reading: Harari, *21 Lessons*: Introduction; Part 1: Technological Challenges, Chapters 1 & 2.

Week 3 (10/2) **Technology run amuck 2: BIG DATA "R" Us**

Biometric (& genomic) monitoring plus advanced computing →BIG DATA. What is freedom and equality in the world of BIG DATA? Who's the consumer? What's the product? What happens when BIG DATA knows you better (psychologically, behaviorally, emotionally) than you (or your family and friends) do? BIG DATA and "the Market", arbiters of all worth and value? Human destiny in the Age of Technological Disruption. Free will and decision making in the Age of BIG DATA. You've been HACKED! BT IT* BD=☹ or, welcome to the zombie army for political and economic ends.*

Reading: Harari Part 1: Technological Challenges, Chapters 3 & 4.

Week 4 (10/9) **Polis of the Future: Everything is Economic, Everything is Political**

Global homogenization and One World Civilization. Globalization: Economies, cultures, races, ethnicities, immigrants. Freedom in the 21st Century. Passing of Liberal Democracy & Rise of Neo-Nationalism → Authoritarianism → Fascism → Dictatorship? Globalization, global crises, global solutions: Climate, pandemics, citizenship. Beyond Economic Growth: The Rich Get Richer, the Rest Get Poorer. Social Media run amuck. Shredding the "Social Fabric". Memes "R" Us. "Cancel Culture": Demise of social discourse, honest dialog & the rise of intolerance. Freedom of Speech vs. Freedom of Reach. Your "God" (read "Ideology", if you like) may sanction a multitude of "sins". Racism, Classism, Culturism. The future of religions & ideologies of all stripes.

Reading: Harari Part 2: The Political Challenge, Chapters 5-9.

Week 5 (10/16) **Be Afraid, Very Afraid**

Freedom and control in the Age of Fear: Terrorism, war, radicalization, genocide, gun violence, “American carnage”, lawlessness, civil unrest, vigilantism, police states, surveillance, geofencing, extremism, anarchy, disease pandemics, conspiracy mongering, disruptive technologies, “100 Seconds to Midnight”

Reading: Harari Part 3 Despair and Hope 1: Chapters 10-12.

Week 6 (10/23) **God in the 21st Century**

Morality, ethics, justice, right, wrong, good, bad, God-given or naturally evolved, adaptive human social/behavioral constructs?

Reading: Harari Part 3 Despair and Hope 2: Chapters 13 & 14

Week 7 (10/30) **Fake news, disinformation, propaganda, groupthink: The new post-factual age where anything goes.**

Phony “facts” and twisted “truths”. Truth and trust in the Age of Trump. The “Fake News” Pandemic—why are we so susceptible. Whoever controls the story controls the truth. So, who controls the story? What’s up with Q-Anon?--Conspiracies of all sorts. “Deep Fakes”. True/False, it’s all opinion anyway so let’s just take a vote. What’s real in a world of illusion? We know less than we think. If you can, check it for yourself. Our brilliant sci-fi future, inevitable or distracting pipedream?; welcome or dangerous? The colonization of space--Our moral duty? Our ongoing manifest destiny? Our purpose, as a species (or as a cyborg, or...) to spread through the Cosmos, and thereby (in our opinion) render it conscious and intelligent? Or, would we be just another invasive species?

Reading : Harari Part 4, Chapters 15-18.

Week 8 (11/6) **Know Thyself—Know Thy Operating System (AND Presidential Election Aftermath)**

*Muddled & befuddled in **Infosmog**. A Hierarchy of mentation. Role of education in a society without “jobs” (why is education always about jobs, anyway?) Authentic education: Self-actualization and why it matters. A “new” paradigm: The 4 Cs--Critical thinking, Communication, Collaboration, Creativity. Seductive devices & irrelevant distractions: Entertaining (even “edutaining”?) ourselves to death. **Finding YOUR story:** Your story is NOT society’s story, so don’t look there for your authentic self. Who is that voice in your head? **“If...you want to retain some control of your personal existence and the future of life, you have to run faster than the algorithms, faster than Amazon, faster than the government, and get to know yourself before they do. To run fast, don’t take much luggage with you. Leave all your illusions behind. They are very heavy.”** (Harari). In the final analysis, what (if anything) is uniquely human (and uniquely you), and so valuable to the Universe that it is to be cherished and preserved beyond all accounting? Final thoughts?*

Reading: Harari Part 5, Chapters 19-21

* This is called a “flow” (and not a “syllabus”) for a reason. The course is not meant to be didactic, but more like an adventurous canoe trip; we’ll explore what’s around the next bend in the river when we get there. And, it’s called “provisional” because it is open to change as we go along. Overall, the structure

closely follows the sections and chapters in Harari. However, the “stream of consciousness” subtopics for each class go well beyond Harari. Moreover, they are purposely meant to be provocative and controversial, but not offensive. What we do or don’t specifically cover, however, depends to some extent on you. Read over the “Flow” and let me know what seems most interesting and important to you as the term progresses.

From time to time, I may call your attention to something online that I would like us to read or view prior to the week’s class. I’ll post such things on our MSC course page, and be in touch by e-mail.