



Homo Exterminans



Sapiens • Yuval Noah Harari • Harvill Secker • 2014

Fields of Blood • Karen Armstrong • The Bodley Head • 2014

IN 1973 Jacob Bronowski, mathematician and humanist, presented a TV series entitled *The Ascent of Man*, followed by a book that was almost a word-for-word transcript of the 13 episodes. He traced the development of human civilisation through science, from flint tools to the nuclear age, and argued that science is the recognition of the uniqueness of man, and a pride in his gifts and works.

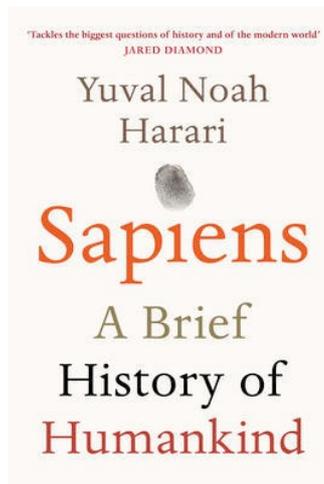
Yet Bronowski, a Polish Jew, was no naive optimist. Science, he argued, was essentially about questioning and overturning assumed certainties. When it becomes dogma, when people believe they have absolute knowledge, with no test in reality, then they may betray the human spirit with horrible consequences.

To emphasise the point he went to Auschwitz, where many of his relatives died. He dipped his hand in a muddy pond into which the ashes of many of the victims were flushed and lifted up a clod of earth. “We have to cure ourselves of the itch for absolute knowledge and power”, he said. “We have to close the distance between the push-button order and the human act. We have to touch people”.

The title of the Bronowski series deliberately inverted that of Charles Darwin’s 1871 book *The Descent of Man*. That would, though, be a good alternative name for Yuval Noah Harari’s pessimistic tome *Sapiens*. The title is surely ironic, for Harari’s thesis is that we are not at all wise but have been on a downward spiral since the cognitive revolution crucially discovered language 70,000 years ago.

It was language that enabled homo sapiens to co-operate in huge numbers particularly through the invention of myths such as gods, nations, money, human rights and laws, none of which exists in reality outside our common imagination. This co-operation enabled us to wipe out rivals like Neanderthals.

The power of our imagination has turned us into self-made gods lording over the planet, wiping out half its larger mammals even before we invented the wheel. Then about 10-12,000 years ago came the Agricultural Revolution, during which we not only destroyed the habitats of countless animal and bird species but also rendered others like sheep, pigs, cattle and chickens as among the most miserable creatures that



ever lived. The vast majority of humans were little better, being turned into slaves and serfs of a privileged few, so that the essence of the Agricultural Revolution was “the ability to keep more people alive under worse conditions” (p83).

Harari’s third stage is the Scientific Revolution, which began about 500 years ago, which in turn led to the Industrial Revolution 200 years ago, the Information Revolution 50 years ago, and finally the Biotechnical Revolution into which we recently entered. This last phase may signal the end of *Homo sapiens* when we are replaced by bioengineered post-humans – cyborgs that might live for ever. Thus *Homo sapiens* would become *Homo exterminans*, the ultimate destroyer of humankind.

Harari, who lectures at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem,

writes with flair and considerable chutzpah, and his book contains many illuminating insights, but its general thesis doesn’t stand up to close examination. Indeed he frequently argues against it himself. Following Pinker, he demonstrates that violence has decreased. So too have many killer diseases, and our treatment of animals and children is much better in many parts of the world than in earlier times. Harari falls back on the unprovable idea that people were happier in the Stone Age. If so, for most it was short and sweet, for the average life expectancy was barely 20.

This curate’s egg of a book is full of ridiculous ideas, not least its treatment of Humanism. Harari informs us that “Humanist religions worship humanity...Humanism is a belief that *Homo sapiens* has a unique and sacred nature, which is fundamentally different from the nature of all other animals and of all other phenomena” (p230). This is arrant nonsense. Humanism is not a religion. We do not worship humanity; on the contrary, we are well aware of human imperfections.

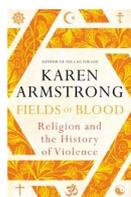
Nor do we believe that we are fundamentally different from other animals – we are fully aware that we share about 98% of our DNA with chimpanzees. *Humanist Manifesto III* states that “Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change”. In other words, we are animals, with no God-given or inherent right to subdue other animals.

Harari’s charge that “the rest of the world and all other beings exist solely for the benefit of the species”, is not humanist but religious. According to Genesis, it is humankind that has ‘dominion’ over the animals and “every living thing shall be food for you”. Animals have rights too, though many religious societies ignore them. It is Humanism not religion that has tamed speciesism in the west and promoted laws to protect animals.

Harari tells us that Humanism has split into three rival sects: liberal humanism; socialist humanism and evolutionary humanism. He even has a table to show it. Again, this is way off the mark. All Humanism is evolutionary, just as all credible science is evolutionary; and all Humanism tries to reconcile freedom and equality. We may argue about the balance between the two, but we would be clear that any attempt to pursue one to the total exclusion of the other is a recipe for disaster.

One of Harari's silliest judgments – and one that should make us sceptical of his other wild claims throughout the book – is his suggestion that the most famous representatives of evolutionary humanism were the Nazis. He fails to realise that the heart of Humanism is not an obsession with humanity but a belief in *humaneness*, which is all about compassion, love and kindness, the very antithesis of Nazism. And, it has to be said, it is also something that his gloomy, 'smart alec' trawl of human history lacks.

Karen Armstrong, a former nun and prolific writer on religion, states a modern manta on page 1 of *Fields of Blood*: "In the West the idea that religion is inherently violent is now taken for granted and seems self-evident. As one who speaks on religion, I constantly hear how cruel and aggressive it has been, a view that, eerily, is expressed in same way almost every time: 'Religion has been the cause of all the major wars in history'".



In 366 pages of text and 70 pages of notes, she seeks to demonstrate that this is patently untrue. Of the thousands of major conflicts, it is doubtful if 10% could be ostensibly classified as having been fought over religion. The exceptions do stick in the mind, though: the Crusades, the medieval anti-Semitic pogroms, the Spanish Inquisition, the 17th century wars of religion... in the case of the West, we might stop there. The two world wars weren't over religion, were they? Or the Holocaust? Or Stalin's purges?

Even in those cases where religion appears to be the impetus, it is often being exploited to promote other causes such as social upheaval or extreme nationalism, and eco-

nomic or political factors. In the very first civilisation in Uruk, the rulers used the promise of heaven to justify oppression; in other words, as the opium of the people. Sometimes, as Armstrong says, religion has actually put a brake on violence. "In religious history, the struggle for peace has been just as important as the holy war". She mentions Buddha, Confucius, Zoroaster, Jesus and many others who advocated the Golden Rule and loving your enemies. In her view religion is used as a scapegoat and violence is fundamental to the human condition.

Yet we could legitimately argue, for example, that religious influences didn't go away so easily in the West and that 20th century fascism and communism were politicised religions – the last, aggressive throw of the dice by the religious mind in a growing secular age. They had many of the same features: sacred texts, utopian beliefs, infallible, messianic leaders, high priests, hierarchical organisations, strong sense of community, and so on.

Since 1945, more liberal secular ideologies have prevailed in more humane, tolerant and peaceful societies, in contrast to theocratic states which are characteristically inhumane, intolerant, totalitarian and often aggressive.

In recent years we have witnessed the ghastly deeds of the bombers of al Qaeda, the butchers of Isis, the slashers of Boko Haram, the misogynists of the Taliban and, albeit to a lesser extent, the fundamentalist loyalist and republican Christians of Northern Ireland and the fundamentalist Jews and Muslims of Israel and Palestine. The activists in these cases have imbibed the myth of redemptive violence, something that Armstrong does not discuss, even though it explains how religion gives metaphysical significance to the savagery.

Without religion to justify and sanctify it, violence is exposed for what it is: a destructive negation of humanity. And while it may not ostensibly cause all wars, religion feeds and fortifies the political and economic rivalries and hatreds that lead to conflict. So, while religion is certainly not all bad, the world would nevertheless be a much better and happier place without it.
