

# THE FUTURE AND HUMAN INNOVATION

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The start of a new year is always a good time to contemplate the future. In January of each year I organize a personal creativity session to design the year for myself and I give each year a theme – with my only daughter reaching adulthood and starting University this year I have designated 2017 as the year of planting a new crop (and I am not thinking reproductively).

It is often argued that the distinguishing feature of our astonishing human cognition is the ability to project into the future with images and recall the past with memories. So let's do some cognitive work together, and depending on your disposition, we can try to figure out how we humans got into the fine mess we currently occupy and how we are going to get out of it, or we can marvel at our accomplishments and wonder where they will take us next!

I am proposing a Guide for our investigation. Yuval Noah Harari, a “big history” boffin from the University of Jerusalem, recently wrote a smash hit about the brief history of humankind titled “Sapiens”. Now he has followed up that effort with a brief conjecture on the next one hundred years for humanity and the planet called “Homo Deus”.

In “Sapiens” Harari chronicles how we homo sapiens in a remarkably short time outflanked the competing versions of humans and other fauna on the planet and came to dominate the earth. It is a glorious story – except for the dark bits (more later). In my brief history of his brief history, our ability to think and to communicate enabled us to cooperate and adapt in ways that others did not and we prevailed over the earth. He argues that our advance was driven on by two great assets, namely our technological innovations and our cultural innovations.

I think many of us appreciate the role of our technological and scientific abilities but may not fully appreciate the importance of our meaning-making

cultural innovations which enabled us to cooperate and organize ourselves at ever greater levels of magnitude and sophistication. These cultural innovations go beyond physical reality or subjective reality – they are an inter-subjective reality which is based entirely on collective agreement. Religions are a great example of cultural innovations and they enabled humans to ascribe meaning and organization and order to our random and arbitrary interactions in spectacular fashion.

Harari cites money as another example of a spectacular cultural innovation. Money is an inter-subjective reality – we all agree that this coin, or note or computer digit is equal to ten turnips or a million ounces of gold or the Gross National Output of Australia. Once we made such a leap of ingenuity and faith, human beings were able to go way beyond the barter society and develop the most extraordinarily rich and complex trading network throughout the globe. Enforceable laws helped this too and they are another example of an inter-subjective innovation.

The modern corporation is an example of a cultural innovation. Honda can close a car plant, but Honda continues. The CEO of Honda can retire and headquarters be reduced to rubble by an earthquake but Honda continues. Honda can stop making cars and produce only motor bikes and Honda continues. Where is Honda? What is Honda? Certainly there are many physical manifestations of Honda and when I drive my Civic Hybrid it is a subjective reality for me too, but fundamentally Honda is a collective idea, a cultural phenomenon which enables extraordinary levels of cooperation and accomplishment. This will be an important discussion because it may hold the clue to how we get out of our current collective hole and/or make the next glorious advance in our collective history – more later. On a more prosaic level – namely, your current paid leadership role – it may also be a very important insight into one of the ways you can manage more success and adaptation in your business and organization this year by enabling new collective thinking and cultural innovation.

Harari argues that around the time of the Enlightenment humans made some major technological and cultural changes. The modern scientific revolution was born and God-centred religion was supplanted for many by a human-centred belief system often described as Humanism. He argues that both innovations

have led to extraordinary accomplishments by Homo Sapiens. He contends that most of human history has been dominated by three great monsters – plague, hunger and war. Although these enemies have hardly been eliminated, he argues that for the very first time in human history they are being beaten and are in retreat. Humans are the undisputed rulers of the earth and we are winning against our common enemies. These are macro trends of course, and they can seem coldly abstract as another suicide bombing occurs in a café in Paris and another child dies of malnutrition in Aleppo.

So what are the dark clouds? Well the immediate dark cloud is that we have put humans front and centre, and in the process we are ignoring our dependence on our fragile eco-system of earth, fauna and flora. We are trashing our own nest and we are at risk of a universal correction. We are out of balance and at this time of our greatest achievements we ourselves may go the way of the dinosaurs. We are good adaptors and we are good co-operators when we try, but our own cultural innovation of Humanism and the technological innovation from the Scientific Revolution need re-thinking and conscious adjustment.

But Harari gets much darker than that. He believes that Humanism itself may soon be extinct, a worrying thought for someone like myself who considers himself to be a secular humanist with a small spiritual bent. Harari argues that the big possibility of the next one hundred years is that Homo Sapiens create a super race of Homo Deus and that most of us ordinary humans become their slaves. That Google will be the model for everything. That large sections of the scientific and medical professions already believe that humans are merely biochemical algorithms, and as ever more powerful theories and computers enable us to decipher the algorithms we will be able to improve upon and alter the human formula. We could extend life indefinitely, for instance. We will be gods – or perhaps a select few of us. Our robots and computers will be able to think better than we can. No longer will mere mortal and limited Homo Sapiens sustain a central place in our belief and value system, and other gods may struggle to compete too!

Of course, this scenario reads like science fiction and nobody can predict the future – not yet anyway – but Harari does present a lot of evidence of current developments and trends to suggest that this is a possible hypothesis. And

there are plenty of more immediate and mid-term challenges awaiting us too. There is the stark challenge of large-scale global warming and climate change. There is the surge of refugees fleeing local conflicts around the world, and the rise of nationalism, a new authoritarianism and greater intolerance as evidenced by Brexit and Trumpism. Our democratic achievements are under threat. There is the growing income disparities in current capitalism which are fueling some of these problems, and the challenge of finding enough jobs for the next generation in the face of technological advances. Market-based capitalism has proved such a fruitful and enduring economic system until now because it has been adaptable, especially by accommodating to pressure from organised labour, social democratic and liberal democratic parties, and consumers, but will human society rise to the latest challenges?

I believe that the big challenge that the future presents to us all is this: to keep making conscious choices about what kind of human beings we are and what kind of world we want to live in. Harari thinks that conscious choice itself may soon be a thing of the past in the reign of Homo Deus! At a time when large sections of humanity should be more respectful and less sceptical of the factual expertise of our scientists and economists, more of us should be pushing back still against aspects of their value systems. Technological innovations can have a logic of their own but humans do not need to passively submit to that logic. The development of the atom bomb did and still does threaten to blow us all off the planet but we have managed to manage it for the past short and wonderful seventy years and use the threat to reduce large scale conflicts. We are the authors and protectors of our inter-subjective reality and the institutions which flow from it.

Now may be the time to be actively engaged in collective thinking and cultural innovation which benefits our relationships, our workplaces, humanity and our planet. Cultural innovation, as well as technological innovation, is part of the job remit for a business or community leader. Now may be the time to act locally and to think big. Now is certainly a good time to model some effective leadership in your workplace and in the community.