

Speaking Fiction to Power

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No one, of course, knows everything; but if there is one intellectual alive today who purports to come close, it is Yuval Noah Harari. The formerly obscure Oxford-trained Israeli academic historian shot to global prominence in 2014 with the English-language publication of his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, originally published in Hebrew in 2011. Harari has since written two further global bestsellers: *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, published in 2016, and *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, published in 2018. Collectively, Harari's books have sold more than 35 million copies worldwide, and been translated into 65 different languages. They have received rapturous praise from numerous newspapers, and from figures as diverse as fellow public intellectual Jared Diamond, former US president Barack Obama, billionaire Facebook owner Mark Zuckerberg, Nobel Prize-winning novelist Kazuo Ishiguro, and Academy Award-winning actor Natalie Portman. Harari's TED talks have been watched by millions online, and he is a regular invitee to the World Economic Forum at Davos. The London *Times* has even gone as far as to describe him as "the great thinker of our age".

Praise for the self-described "historian and philosopher", however, is far from universal. In a review of *Sapiens* published in the *New English Review*, the respected anthropologist C. R. Hallpike dismissed the book as "infotainment", designed merely to "titillate its readers" rather than offer "a serious contribution to knowledge". Moreover, in a scathing review of *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* for the *New Statesman*, commissioning editor Gavin Jacobsen openly mocked Harari for writing "like an undergraduate struggling to reach the word count", before remarking that the book mostly consisted of "pointless asides and cringeworthy platitudes of fortune-cookie quality". And, in a recent extended critique of Harari's scientific claims published in the leftist journal *Current Affairs*, behavioral scientist Darshana Narayanan admonished Harari for his "error-riddled" work, and, indeed, went as far as to suggest that Harari is "in many ways ... a fraud".

So, is Harari "the great thinker of our age"? Or is he an academic charlatan, serving up vacuous infotainment for mass consumption?

This article will argue that he is the latter - in fact, that he is *much worse* than the latter. More

specifically, I will argue that Harari's world-view is rife with inconsistencies and confusion, and that, ultimately, his great skill consists in being able to pass off aimless speculative futurology as intellectually serious work. Furthermore, I will attempt to show that Harari is admired by the global neoliberal elite not only because he rarely, if ever, criticizes their core assumptions and values, but also because his vision of the future is one which is fully in tune with their own. Thus, he is not *merely* a producer of infotainment for the masses, but, rather, a conduit through which the global elite's own assumptions, desires and dreams are adorned with a veneer of academic respectability.

I. **The Test of Reality**

Let us begin with what is arguably the foundation of Harari's - or, for that matter, any would-be philosopher's - world view: ontology, or, in layman's terms, what does and does not exist. (This topic is apparently so important to Harari that one of the six core "values" of Sapienship, a for-profit organization which Harari and his partner founded in 2019, reads: "Learn to Distinguish Reality from Illusion".)

Though this issue is one that has repeatedly perplexed the history's finest thinkers, Harari, undaunted, nevertheless claims to have solved it outright:

How do you know if an entity is real? Very simple - just ask yourself, 'Can it suffer?' When people burn down the temple of Zeus, Zeus doesn't suffer. When the euro loses its value, the euro doesn't suffer. When a bank goes bankrupt, the bank doesn't suffer. When a country suffers a defeat in war, the country doesn't really suffer. It's just a metaphor. In contrast, when a soldier is wounded in battle, he really does suffer. When a famished peasant has nothing to eat, she suffers. When a cow is separated from her newborn calf, she suffers. This is reality. (Homo Deus, 206)

Harari is apparently so enamored of his solution to this ancient problem that he repeats it almost verbatim in *21 Lessons*, and, indeed, even gives it a name: "the test of reality" (356). The test, as Harari suggests, is simple: if a purported entity can suffer, then it is real; if it can't suffer, then it isn't real. That is, *the ability to suffer is a necessary and sufficient condition for reality*.

The core problem with this criterion is, of course, crushingly obvious: many things exist which cannot suffer. Such entities would include, among other things, physically emergent entities such as trees, rocks, and rivers, as well as physically fundamental entities such as quarks, leptons and gauge bosons. Still, given Harari's claim that the euro also doesn't exist - a claim that many economists would likely dispute - one might initially be tempted to believe that, in employing his "test", Harari is presenting the reader with his own idiosyncratic metaphysics, one which he will later elaborate upon and defend. Unfortunately, however, this is not the case. Indeed, in *Deus*, Harari unambiguously affirms that "trees, rocks, and rivers" are "objective entities", and explicitly contrasts them with "stories about money, gods, nations and corporations" (181), while in *Sapiens* he similarly distinguishes "the objective reality of rivers, trees and lions" from the "imagined reality of gods, nations and corporations" (36). In short: *Harari's own ontology patently fails his own ontological test*.

Nor is this the only inconsistency intrinsic to Harari's ontology. In particular, given Harari's repeated assertions that the self is a "mythological chimera", that "individuality" is a "myth", and that "your core identity" is nothing but "a complex illusion created by neural networks" (*21 Lessons*, 348, 254, 288), it is, on reflection, at best extremely unclear how Harari is entitled to believe in soldiers (to use one of his own proffered examples above). For, according to Harari, experiments by the Nobel Prize-winning economist Daniel Kahneman and others have demonstrated that, rather than having a single permanent self, there are "at least two different selves within us: the experiencing self and the narrating self". The experiencing self, as Harari describes it, consists of "our moment-to-moment consciousness", while our narrating self is responsible for "retrieving memories, telling stories, and

making big decisions" (*Deus*, 342-3).

On the obvious way of understanding this conception of selfhood, then, there is never *one* single soldier: rather, there is the experiencing-soldier *and* the narrating-soldier. But, if this is true, it would once again appear to contradict Harari's "test of reality": for only the soldier's *experiencing* self is seemingly capable of suffering; the narrating self, on the other hand, is not capable of experiencing suffering but rather, according to Harari, serves merely to "evaluate" or "average" such experiences (*Deus*, 343, 345). In other words: if we follow Harari's "test of reality" to the letter, the narrating self, strictly speaking, does not exist - and hence, to the extent that "the soldier" is understood as the amalgamation of the experiencing and narrating self, neither does the soldier.

One final incongruity in Harari's ontology is worth remarking upon, namely, his conception of "myths" - a term which, on Harari's idiosyncratic construal, refers not merely to ancient gods and legends, but also to modern laws, nations, and corporations. To summarize brutally Harari's (already brutal) summary of human history as presented in *Sapiens*: the reason why humans were able to progress from being a small band of hunter-gathers in Africa to dominating the globe - or, as Harari puts it, "insignificant animals with no more impact on their environment than gorillas, fireflies, or jellyfish" to becoming the "masters of creation" (4, 42) - is due to our collective ability to believe in such "myths" (or "fictions"). This is because these myths afford us "the unprecedented ability to cooperate in large numbers" (27), something which no other animal on Earth is capable of doing, including our close relatives (e.g., the chimpanzees).

Unfortunately, Harari is typically inconsistent when it comes to his construal of the afore-mentioned "myths". In *Deus*, for instance, he claims that certain "mythical" institutions, namely the EU and the World Bank, actually "exist", albeit "only in our shared imagination" (176), while in *Sapiens* he writes that laws, money, gods and nations are "inter-subjective phenomena" which "*exist in a different way* from physical phenomena such as radioactivity" (132; emphasis added).

The claim that social constructs such as laws, nations, and institutions "exist in a different way" to, say, physically fundamental entities such as electrons, quarks, and gauge bosons, or even to physically emergent entities such as tables, chairs and rivers, is not overly controversial. However, the claim that they *do not exist at all* - that they are ontological "fictions" on a par with, say, Ancient Greek or Viking gods - certainly is. Indeed, as Hallpike points out in the above-cited article, the claim that laws, nations, and corporations are fictional would appear to be "a perverse way of stating the obvious fact" that such entities are not material. As Hallpike goes on to remark, the fact that such entities "are immaterial and cannot be seen, touched or smelled does not make them *fiction*, like Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy"; indeed, as he notes, it would seem that Harari is "just in a philosophical muddle that confuses what is material with what is real, and what is immaterial with fiction".

Furthermore, the claim that such entities are "fictional" is at odds not only with everyday discourse, but also - troublingly for Harari, given his professed fealty to science - scientific practice. As the cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter and philosopher Daniel Dennett pointed out several decades ago:

Our world is filled with things that are neither mysterious and ghostly nor simply constructed out of the building blocks of physics. Do you believe in voices? How about haircuts? Are there such things? What are they? What, in the language of the physicist, is a hole - not an exotic black hole, but just a hole in a piece of cheese, for instance? Is it a physical thing? What is a symphony? Where in space and time does "The Star-Spangled Banner" exist? Is it nothing but some ink trails in the Library of Congress? Destroy that paper and the anthem would still exist. Latin still exists but it is no longer a living language. The language of the cave people of France no longer exists at all. The game of bridge

is less than a hundred years old. What sort of a thing is it? It is not animal, vegetable, or mineral.

These things are not physical objects with mass, or a chemical composition, but they are not purely abstract objects either – objects like the number pi, which is immutable and cannot be located in space and time. These things have birthplaces and histories. They can change, and things can happen to them. They can move about – much the way a species, a disease, or an epidemic can. We must not suppose that science teaches us that every thing anyone would want to take seriously is identifiable as a collection of particles moving about in space and time. (The Mind's I, 1981, 6-7)

Since none of the above-mentioned (putative) entities are capable of suffering, Harari's ontological criterion would appear to compel him to regard them all as *actually* non-existent. Such a world-view might, of course, be consistent. But, in the absence of any supporting argumentation – argumentation which, unfortunately, Harari never provides, insofar as he never *once* gives us a reason to believe that in the validity of his ontological “test” – it is scarcely credible.

I do not, of course, wish to suggest that understanding the precise metaphysical nature of social constructs or emergent entities is a straightforward affair. But I *do* think it is fairly obvious that *any* world-view which equates, without argument, Google or the French language or symphonies (or, for that matter, *Harari's own books*) with actual fictions such as Thor, Zeus or the Flying Spaghetti Monster – and which claims, more specifically, *that they are on an ontological par* – is not to be taken seriously; indeed, if anything, it is worthy only of ridicule.

II. **Predictions & Counterfactuals**

Harari's ontology is not the only deeply confused, and confusing, aspect of his world-view. Indeed, his epistemology – that is, his construal of the sorts of claims one can justifiably claim to *know* – is similarly riddled with inconsistencies.

Take, for instance, what Harari is arguably most known (and liked) for, namely, making wild hypotheses about the near-to-distant future of humanity. Here is a representative example of the sorts of future scenarios that Harari tends to describe:

[T]he grandchildren of Silicon Valley tycoons and Moscow billionaires might become a superior species to the grandchildren to Appalachian hillbillies and Siberian villagers. In the long run, such a scenario might even de-globalize the world, as the upper caste congregates inside a self-proclaimed 'civilization' and builds walls and moats to separate it from hordes of 'barbarians' outside. [...] Not just entire classes, but entire countries and continents might become irrelevant. Fortifications guarded by drones and robots might separate the self-proclaimed civilized zone, where cyborgs fight one another with logic bombs, from the barbarian lands where feral humans fight one another with machetes and Kalashnikovs. (21 Lessons, 93)

Epistemologically, there is nothing inherently wrong with this sort of statement: it is, of course, *possible* that such a scenario might one day occur. Hypothesizing about what is *merely possible*, however, is not a particularly interesting – or, I would argue, generally worthwhile – academic exercise. The far more substantive issue is whether such scenarios are *probable* – and, if so, to precisely what extent.

In his more careful moments, Harari himself notes the effective impossibility of making successful predictions about the future of humanity, as well as the exceedingly poor record of other historians, philosophers and scientists who have dabbled in futurology. As he notes in *Sapiens*:

The future is unknown.... History teaches us that what seems to be just around the corner may never materialize due to unforeseen barriers, and that other imagined barriers will in fact come to pass.

(462)

Furthermore, in *Deus* he remarks that “nobody can predict how the global economy will look in ten years,” let alone hundreds of years from now (59), before adding that when historians “try their hand at prophecy” they typically do so “without notable success” (68). Moreover, in *21 Lessons*, when discussing the possibility of automation leading to mass future unemployment, he notes, correctly, that “fears that automation will create massive unemployment go back to the nineteenth century, and so far have never materialized” (29), and explicitly states that “today we *have no idea* how China or the rest of the world will look in 2050. We don’t know what people will do for a living, we don’t know how armies or bureaucracies will function, and we don’t know what gender relations will be like” (302; emphasis added).

Indeed, in some instances Harari goes beyond simply emphasizing the future’s inherent unknowability. In particular, he occasionally notes that, notwithstanding futurology’s abysmal record, making successful predictions about the future is now *harder* than it has ever been:

Of course, humans could never predict the future with accuracy. But today it is more difficult than ever before, because since technology enables us to engineer bodies, brains, and minds, we can no longer be certain about anything – including things that previously seemed fixed and eternal. (*21 Lessons*, 301-2; emphasis added)

The natural way of understanding of Harari, then, is that he believes the future is entirely unknowable (“we have no idea how...the world will look in 2050”) – in fact, it is *more* unknowable than it ever previously been. But this, in turn, raises the obvious question: what, exactly, is the epistemological status of the “predictions” that pepper, indeed largely swamp, Harari’s books? How can we predict a future about which we know precisely nothing?

Harari is, once again, characteristically inconsistent on this issue. Thus, in *Sapiens*, he writes that the “nightmares – or fantasies” that he describes in the book “are just stimulants for your imagination” (463), while in *21 Lessons* he claims it is “obvious” that “most of” the scenarios he delineates “[are] just speculation” (44). Moreover, in *Deus*, Harari writes that “[a]ll the predictions that pepper this book are no more than an attempt to discuss present-day dilemmas, and an invitation to change the future” (74-5), before going on to remark, slightly cryptically, that “the future described [in *Deus*] is merely the future of the past – i.e. a future based on the ideas and hopes that dominated the world for the last 300 years. The real future – i.e. a future born of the new ideas and hopes of the twenty-first century – might be completely different” (76).

But for all of Harari’s explicit claims that the scenarios he describes are “just stimulants for your imagination” or “just speculation”, it is also unquestionably the case that, at least in his *less* careful moments, Harari explicitly claims, or heavily implies, that many of the scenarios he describes will, in fact, *probably* or even *definitely* occur. Furthermore, although *some* of his more concrete predictions are likely true purely by virtue of their utter obviousness (e.g., “Russia...does not seem likely [to] embark on a global campaign of physical conquest” [*21 Lessons*, 207]) or complete vacuity (e.g., “The big challenges of the twenty-first century will be global in nature” [*21 Lessons*, 128]), this is by no means the case for the majority of them. Thus, for instance, in *Sapiens* Harari writes that “the future masters of the world *will probably* be more different from us than we are from Neanderthals. Whereas we and the Neanderthals are at least human, our inheritors *will be godlike*” (461; emphasis added). Moreover, in parts of *Deus* and *21 Lessons*, Harari appears to gain increasing confidence in his predictive powers. Here is a representative sample of his “predictions”:

- *During the twenty-first century the border between history and biology is likely to blur not because we will discover biological explanations for historical events, but rather because*

ideological fictions will rewrite DNA strands; political and economic interests will redesign the climate; and the geography of mountains and rivers will give way to cyberspace. As human fictions are translated into genetic and electronic codes, the intersubjective reality will swallow up the objective reality and biology will merge with history. (Deus, 177)

- *In the twenty-first century we will create more powerful fictions and more totalitarian religions than in any previous era. With the help of biotechnology and computer algorithms these religions will not only control our minute-by-minute existence, but will be able to shape our bodies, brains, and minds, and to create entire virtual worlds complete with hells and heavens. (Deus, 207)*
- *The revolutions in biotech and infotech will give us control of the world inside us, and will enable us to engineer and manufacture life. We will learn how to design brains, extend lives and kill thoughts at our discretion. (21 Lessons, 15-6)*
- *The algorithms are watching you right now. They are watching whether you go, what you buy, and who you meet. Soon they will monitor all your steps, all your breaths, all your heartbeats. They are relying on Big Data and machine learning to get to know you better and better. And once these algorithms know you better than you know yourself, they could control and manipulate you, and you won't be able to do much about it. You will live in the matrix, or The Truman Show. (21 Lessons, 311)*

Indeed, in the introduction to *21 Lessons*, Harari goes even further than this, and implies that our own extinction as a species is imminent:

In the final chapter [of 21 Lessons] I indulge in a few personal remarks, talking as one Sapiens to another, just before the curtain goes down on our species and a completely different drama begins. (7; emphasis added)

In short, Harari faces a dilemma. Either he admits the near-impossibility of predicting the future of humanity, in which case his “predictions” are nothing more than (as Harari himself puts it) “speculation” and “stimulants” for the reader’s imagination. Or he must claim that he has special, quasi-oracular knowledge of humanity’s future – in which case, he should disavow his statements about it being effectively impossible, now more than ever before, of making such predictions. In other words: either we should consider Harari’s books to consist largely of nothing more than highly speculative, amateurish science-fiction; or we should take him to be claiming that he is, in a quite literal sense, an oracle.

Before closing this section, it is worth noting how a similar epistemological inconsistency pervades other aspects of Harari’s world view, in particular his understanding of counterfactual statements (i.e., statements which involve what would have happened in imagined, but non-actual, scenarios). Take, for instance, what Harari writes concerning the suggestion that George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and Barack Obama’s military interventions in the Middle East may have prevented “a nuclear 9/11”:

George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Barack Obama and their administrations can argue with some justification that by hounding terrorists they forced them to think more about their survival than about acquiring nuclear bombs. They might thereby have saved the world from a nuclear 9/11. Since this is a counterfactual claim – ‘if we hadn’t launched the War on Terror, al-Qaeda would have acquired nuclear weapons’ – it is difficult to judge whether it is true or not. (21 Lessons, 197)

Harari is, of course, mistaken in his suggestion that the truth value of *all* counterfactual claims is “difficult to judge”: if I know anything, I know, for instance, that if I drop my phone it will fall to the ground. Moreover, given that there is little, if any, evidence to suggest that this Bush/Blair/Obama argument is correct – Harari, in particular, does not provide any additional supporting argumentation or further references to substantiate this (exceedingly dubious) claim – it is also difficult to discern

what “justification” for this claim exists *apart from* its inherent counterfactuality. Indeed, the obvious way of understanding Harari’s point here would be to see him as suggesting that *all* counterfactual statements are at least partially justified, purely by virtue of their inherent counterfactuality.

Putting to one side the manifest implausibility of such a view (is the claim that, e.g., “if I had dropped the salt, Joe Biden would have turned into a cat” *really* partially justified?), it stands in stark contrast to many other passages in Harari’s work, in which he asserts with apparent certainty numerous other, highly controversial counterfactual claims. To give just a few examples:

- *If the USA had deployed killer robots in Vietnam, the massacre of My Lai would never have occurred.* (21 Lessons, 78)
- *If data becomes concentrated in too few hands – humankind will split into different species.* (21 Lessons, 94).
- *Without nukes there would have been no Beatles, no Woodstock and no overflowing [Western] supermarkets.* (Deus, 309-10)

Given Harari’s studied agnosticism on the issue of Bush/Blair/Obama’s policies in the Middle East’s preventing terrorists from acquiring nuclear weapons, however, it is far from clear how he could be entitled to make such bold hypothetical statements. Are the alternative counterfactuals – e.g., if data becomes concentrated in too few hands, humankind will *not* split into different species – equally plausible? If so, whence Harari’s apparent confidence in the truth of the counterfactuals that he mentions? And, if they are not equally plausible, why is he apparently unable to assess the truth value of the Bush/Blair/Obama claim?

In summary, Harari’s epistemology, much like his metaphysics, is a mess. His repeated admission that he cannot predict the future of humanity is inconsistent with the apparent certainty with which he asserts many of his predictions, and his affected agnosticism when it comes assessing the truth value of some counterfactual statements is at odds with the certainty with which he makes many other counterfactual claims.

III. **Life-Coachism, Morality & Politics**

In addition to recounting the entire history of the human species, predicting a future in which we are all ruled by algorithms or superhuman oligarchs, and engaging in half-baked philosophical theorizing, Harari also frequently ventures into the field of (what one might call) life-coachism – that is, offering faux-deep, semi-aphoristic life advice (or, as Harari puts it, “lessons”) to his readers. In truth, many of the life tips proffered by Harari are almost comically banal (e.g., “If you really care about something – join a relevant organization” [21 Lessons, 364]) or impractically cryptic (e.g., “If you can really observe yourself for the duration of a single breath – you will understand it all” [21 Lessons, 362]). Moreover, those lessons that do not fall into either of these two categories tend to rest on utterly bizarre interpretative assumptions. Take, for instance, Harari’s injunction that humanity “switch from panic mode to bewilderment”:

Panic is a form of hubris. It comes from the smug feeling that I know exactly where the world is heading – down. Bewilderment is more humble, and therefore more clear-sighted. (21 Lessons, 27)

Who would have thought that panic is a privilege of the smug – or, for that matter, that it involves knowing *exactly* “where the world is heading”?

In addition to life-coachism, however, Harari often enjoys passing extremely dubious moral or political judgements on major historical, moral or political questions. For instance, he suggests – despite voluminous evidence to the contrary – that the US’s dropping nuclear bombs on Japan saved lives and

may even have been necessary to end the Second World War (*Sapiens*, 291); he claims that “empires wielded so much power and changed the world to such an extent that perhaps they cannot perhaps be simply labelled good or evil” – a suggestion which is as morally dubious as it is bizarrely illogical (implying, as it does, that if one wields a sufficient amount of power, and changes the world to a sufficient extent, one thereby transcends the traditional categories of good and evil [*Sapiens*, 337]); he is a frequent expressor of sympathy for Samuel Huntington’s repeatedly debunked thesis that there is a “clash of civilizations” between the “Western” and “Muslim” worlds (“[The EU] might collapse due to its inability to contain the cultural differences between Europeans and migrants from Africa and the Middle East” [*21 Lessons*, 165-6; see also, e.g., 183]); he suggests, idiotically, that “The Nobel Peace Prize to end all peace prizes should have been given to Robert Oppenheimer and his fellow architects of the atomic bomb” (*Sapiens*, 416), despite the mountain of documentary evidence that humanity has repeatedly come within a hair’s breadth of a full-blown nuclear war and consequent possible human extinction; and he has made the truly extraordinary claim that, “Like the USA [...], Israel seems to understand that in the twenty-first century the most successful strategy is to sit on the fence and let the others do the fighting for you” (*21 Lessons*, 203), despite the fact that the US has invaded, occupied or bombed at least half-a-dozen countries this century – including, notably, an 8-year invasion and occupation of Iraq and an only recently-concluded 20-year invasion and occupation of Afghanistan – while Israel has launched four wars on Gaza, and one on Lebanon (and repeatedly bombed Syria) over the same period.

Surprisingly, these seriously debatable moral and political judgements often receive very little attention among Harari fans and reviewers. Indeed, Harari appears to have been able to cultivate the impression among the public that he, in some sense, stands above or apart from quotidian political and moral debates; that he is, in essence, an apolitical, scientifically literate scholar who is dispassionately describing where humans, taken as a totality, have come from, where they currently are, and where they are going. As Ian Parker of the *New Yorker* has put it, Harari “claims a space ... above the political fray”.

In truth, however, Harari does no such thing. Rather, his politics is for the most part firmly ensconced within the confines of the neoliberal orthodoxy which is so prevalent among members of the economic and political elite. In particular, he is a firm supporter of “free markets”, and, indeed, often credits them with having led to unprecedented prosperity in the West (despite the inconvenient fact that, among other things, the US was the most protectionist country on Earth until the end of the Second World War [*Deus*, 361]); he is an unabashed critic of the West’s (so-called) adversaries, namely Russia and China (and has even claimed, bizarrely, that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s “official vision” is to “resurrect the old tsarist empire”; [*21 Lessons*, 25]); he is critical of both Donald Trump and British Brexiteers (*21 Lessons*, 18-9); and he is similarly unafraid to criticize other politicians and their supporters who dare to question the global neoliberal order (e.g., in addition to claiming, without evidence, that “socialists discourage self-exploration” [*Deus*, 295], he has charged Bernie Sanders supporters with hypocrisy for having “a vague belief in the in some future revolution, while also believing in the importance of investing your money wisely” [*21 Lessons*, 339]).

Most important of all, however, is Harari’s deferential – some might even call it obsequious – attitude toward the rich and powerful. Thus, not only are Harari’s book jackets typically plastered with acclamation from ex-presidents, billionaire oligarchs and famous actors, but the books themselves typically contain effusive praise, explicit or implicit, for members of the economic elite. Take, for instance, Harari’s discussion of PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel’s comically immodest plans to “live forever”:

Many people are likely to dismiss such statements as teenage fantasy. Yet Thiel is somebody to be taken very seriously. He is one of the most successful and influential entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley with a private fortune estimated at \$2.2 billion. The writing is on the wall: equality is out – immortality

is in. (Deus, 28)

In other words, according to Harari, the *mere* fact that Thiel is a billionaire businessman is a sufficient basis for taking whatever he says, however outlandish, “very seriously”; indeed, “the writing” that some humans will soon achieve immortality is already “on the wall”. So let it be decreed by a Silicon Valley billionaire; so it shall be done.

Numerous other examples of Harari’s quasi-glorification of the economic and financial elite could also be given (e.g., “For thousands of years priests, rabbis and muftis explained that humans cannot control famine, plague and war by their own efforts. Then along came the bankers, investors and industrialists, and with 200 years managed to do exactly that” [*Deus*, 256]). Thus, it would appear that Ian Parker of the *New Yorker’s* suggestion that “it’s not hard to understand Harari’s appeal to Silicon Valley executives, who would prefer to cast a furrowed gaze toward the distant future than to rewrite their privacy policies or their algorithms” is only, at best, partially correct; for in addition to making wildly flattering predictions about the near-to-distant future – futures, in which, for instance, Silicon Valley elites have upgraded themselves into a new species of world-governing super-humans, or in which allowing “Google and Facebook to read all your emails, monitor all your chats and messages, and keep a record of all your Likes and clicks” has assumed the status of a religious dogma (which Harari labels “Dataism” [*Deus*, 457]) – Harari is also careful to heap praise on such people in the present.

Of course, were Harari *solely* to praise members of the economic or financial elite, it would be difficult for him to retain the kind of mass appeal he currently enjoys. Thus, it is critically important to the maintenance of Harari’s global brand that he provide a *vener* of criticism of elites – whilst, at the same time, softening the criticism as much as possible so as not to incur their actual displeasure.

One classic example of this may be found in Harari’s “criticism” of Facebook’s tax avoidance practices (e.g., the company paid less than 2% corporation tax in the UK in 2018): “We can only hope,” Harari writes, “that Facebook can change its business model, adopt a more offline-friendly tax policy [...] and still remain profitable” (*21 Lessons*, 108). In other words, rather than condemning outright Facebook’s outrageous refusal to pay its taxes, Harari instead opts to gently scold the company for not having a “more offline-friendly” tax policy – while still being careful to note explicitly that he hopes the company will remain profitable for the foreseeable future.

Similarly, in his discussion of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s February 2017 “manifesto on the need to build a global community” following the surprise victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US Presidential election – a manifesto which, Harari fawningly remarks, took “three months of soul-searching” to write – Harari mentions, in passing, the true but inconvenient fact that “you can hardly build a global community when you make your money from capturing people’s attention and selling it to advertisers”. Nevertheless, this doesn’t prevent Harari from praising Zuckerberg’s “vision” as both “timely” and “audacious”, and even noting that “Zuckerberg’s *willingness even to formulate* such a vision deserves praise” (*21 Lessons*, 101-3; emphasis added). Thus, once again, rather than criticizing Zuckerberg for the blatant hypocrisy of his “vision” given that his company’s business model undermines the very possibility of building such a community, we should, in Harari’s view, praise Zuckerberg *merely for stating* various vague goals (e.g., helping “people join more meaningful communities”) which we have no reason whatsoever to believe he has the will or the incentive to achieve.

To sum up this section: Harari is by no means as apolitical as many seem to think that he is. For, while he does appear to hold a few opinions which might make some on the more dovish end of the political spectrum squeamish (e.g., his sympathy for the “clash of civilizations” thesis and his apparent love of nuclear bombs), the vast majority of his moral and political views are precisely those that one would

expect of any generic member (or supporter) of the global elite: he is pro-“free market”; he is critical of socialism and right-wing populism; and, more than anything, he is an avid admirer of the rich and powerful – perhaps even more so than he is their admiree.

IV. **Conclusion**

Despite the incoherence of much of his world view, and the unoriginal neoliberal conformity of much of the rest of it, Harari is certainly no fool. Indeed, what is particularly interesting about Harari *qua* public intellectual is the fact that within his works he frequently disavows the very possibility of someone like his public persona existing; that is, someone who is alleged to *know everything*:

[N]o one is an expert on everything. No one is therefore capable of connecting all the dots and seeing the full picture. [...] Nobody can absorb all the latest scientific discoveries, nobody can predict how the global economy will look in ten years, and nobody has a clue where we are heading in such a rush. (Deus, 59; see also, e.g., *21 Lessons*, 253, 267)

Nor is this the only example of Harari making self-aware (or, at least, self-applicable) judgements in his own books. Here are two of what are arguably the most interesting ones:

If you really want truth, you need to escape the black hole of power, and allow yourself to waste a lot of time on the periphery. Revolutionary knowledge rarely makes it to the center, because the center is built on existing knowledge. The guardians of the old order usually determine who gets to reach the center of power, and they tend to filter out the carriers of disturbing unconventional ideas. (*21 Lessons*, 258)

We are all complicit in at least some [...] biases, and we just don't have the time and energy to discover them all. Writing this book brought the lesson home to me on a personal level. When discussing global issues, I am always in danger of privileging the viewpoint of the global elite over that of various disadvantaged groups. (*21 Lessons*, 264)

As this article has argued, it is precisely because Harari's world view is so fully in tune with – indeed, actively supports – the “viewpoint of the global elite” that he is so beloved by them. Moreover, as Harari himself points out, were his views truly “revolutionary” or “disturbing[ly] unconventional”, it would be highly unlikely, if not impossible, that “the guardians of the old order” (i.e., the financial and political elite) would write glowing reviews of his books, invite him to Davos, or pay him as much as \$300,000 to give a talk.

Thus, in summary, Harari is – most likely self-consciously – an intellectual lackey for the rich and powerful, whose books contain just enough of a philosophical or historical veneer of respectability to count as a “serious” or “brainy”, whilst nevertheless indulging people with speculative oracular theories about where humanity is headed centuries from now. He is a public intellectual who, rather than speaking truth to those in power, speaks to them largely in obsequious fictions.