

Book Reviews

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind

By Yuval Noah HARARI

London: Vintage, Penguin Random House, 2014. 456 pp.

ISBN: 978-0099590088 (Hardback)

Reviewed by Charles Bradford BOW

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Humankind's perennial "progress" toward re-innovating modes of luxury and convenience beyond the necessities of subsistence is a prominent feature of human nature or more precisely the dominant characteristic for one of the six human species, *Homo sapiens*. No other branch of species determined the continued existence of native flora and fauna or progressively laid waste to their environment. These consequences are associated with the process of improving the human condition. Yuval Harari's *Sapiens* traces the casualties of this natural inclination toward constructing the "Imagined Order" and, in particular, the human creation of governing systems such as political economy and religion in civil society. In synthesizing transitional moments across the long history or "Big Picture" of human existence, this timely and provocative book skilfully bridges conventions in academic and commercial histories of its kind by threading a

broad range of interdisciplinary evidence and speculative suggestions into a fascinating and highly readable narrative.

Sapiens chronologically proceeds from revolutionary changes in human cognitive development (around 70,000 years ago), agricultural cultivation (10,000 years ago), culture and systems of government (immediately following the preceding period), and the scientific revolution (500 years ago). This method of mapping human development is not new. Seminal Enlightenment works such as Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* (1748), Lord Kames's *Sketches* (1774), and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) among numerous others employed versions of "Stadial History" in examining the history of humankind. Lord Kames and Smith, for example, believed the history of human "progress" consisted of four stages: hunter-gathers, herders of domestic animals, agricultural societies, and marketplace civilizations. For Smith, human societies inevitably "progressed" along this sequential pattern where more advanced and complex stages of society introduced a higher degree of happiness. Like these seminal Enlightenment works, *Sapiens* responds to particular concerns and circumstances in advancing an overarching argument. In doing so, modern concerns with climate change, income inequality, and religious tensions broadly affect this synthesis. Harari challenges the extent to which the modern "Imagined Order" of religion, material wealth, and laws actually achieve individual happiness or satisfaction in developed societies.

The book's central focus on measurable and speculative consequences of the "Imagined Order", which are predicated upon and reinforced by cultural traditions, implicitly attempts to intervene in humanity's projected pathway toward planetary destruction and ultimately our extinction. And yet, Harari devotes little attention to the historical effects of benevolent inclinations, natural religion, and natural jurisprudence on strengthening the bonds of civil society. In an important sense these natural features of humanity function independent of the "Imagined Order" and would inform a very different history of humankind. The emphasis on humankind's destructive nature and our nefarious inclination toward innovating convenience, however, does

not detract from the book's value. While specialists might criticize Harari's loose treatment of evidence in their particular field of expertise, religious spokesmen might label Harari a heretic, and geneticists might bristle against Harari's call for limitations, *Sapiens* illustrates compelling and alarming reasons why humankind as a "Global Empire" should re-evaluate notions of "progress."

***Chen Cheng ji qi Xishi ji yanjiu* 陳誠及其西使記研究
A Study of Chen Cheng and His Records of Embassy to the West]**

By WANG Jiguang (王繼光)

Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014. 317 pp.

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Wang Jigong's meticulously researched study moves away from the conventional notion that Ming (1368-1644) China and Central Asia, known as the "Western Region" to the Chinese, were irreconcilably separate and hostile to each other. It offers a comprehensive examination of Chen Cheng (1365-1457), the most important Ming diplomat sent to Central Asia, and his travelogues - the *Xiyu xingcheng ji* (Record of a Journey to the Western Regions), a chronologically arranged diary that enumerates his trip, and the *Xiyu fanguo zhi* (Record of Foreign Countries in the Western Regions), a group of short essays that describes seventeen Central Asian towns he has visited. Containing a wealth of first-hand information on Central Asian natural environment, economic practices, as well as daily lives and religious customs,