

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind

Chapter 17: 9. The Arrow of History

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The Arrow of History

AFTER THE AGRICULTURAL REVOLUTION, human societies grew ever larger and more complex, while the imagined constructs such as order also became more elaborate. Myths and customs accustomed people, nearly from the moment of birth, to think in certain ways, to be in accordance with certain standards, to want certain things, and to observe certain rules. They then created a network of relationships that enabled millions of strangers to cooperate effectively. This network of relationships is called 'culture'.

During the first half of the twentieth century, scholars taught that every culture was complete and harmonious, possessing an unchanging essence that defined it for all time. Each human group had its own world view and system of social, legal and political arrangements that changed smoothly as the planets going around the sun. In this view, cultures left to their own devices did not change. They just kept going at the same speed and in the same direction. Only a force applied from outside could change them. Anthropologists, historians and politicians thus referred to 'Culture' or 'Tasmanian Culture' as if the same beliefs, norms and values had characterised Samoans and Tasmanians from time immemorial.

Today, most scholars of culture have concluded that the opposite is true. Every culture has its typical beliefs, norms and values, but they are not constant. The culture may transform itself in response to changes in its environment or through interaction with neighbouring cultures. Cultures also undergo transitions due to their own internal dynamics. Even a completely isolated culture existing in an ecologically stable environment cannot avoid change. Unlike the laws of physics, which are free of inconsistencies, every man-made order is packed with internal contradictions. Cultures are constantly trying to reconcile these contradictions, and this process fuels change.

For instance, in medieval Europe the nobility believed in both Christianity and chivalry. A typical nobleman went to church in the morning, listened as the priest held forth on the lives of the saints. 'Vanity of vanities,' said the priest, 'all is vanity. Riches, lust and honour are dangerous temptations. You must rise above them, and follow in Christ's footsteps. Be meek like Him, avoid violence and extravagance, and if attacked, turn the other cheek.' Returning home in a meek and pensive mood, the nobleman would change into his best silks and go to a banquet at his castle. There the wine flowed like water, the minstrel sang of Lancelot and Guinevere, and the guests exchanged dirty jokes and bloody violence. 'It is better to die,' declared the barons, 'than to live with shame. If someone questions your honour, only blood can wipe out the insult. And it is better in life than to see your enemies see before you, and their pretty daughters tremble at your feet?'

The contradiction was never fully resolved. But as the European nobility, clergy and commoners grappled with it, their culture changed. The attempt to cure it out produced the Crusades. On crusade, knights could demonstrate their military prowess and their religious devotion. A military stroke. The same contradiction produced military orders such as the Templars and Hospitallers, who tried to mesh Christian and chivalry more tightly. It was also responsible for a large part of medieval art and literature, such as the tales of King Arthur and the Holy Grail. When Camelot but an attempt to prove that a good knight can and should be a good Christian, and that good Christians make the best knights.

Another example is the modern political order. Ever since the French Revolution, people throughout the world have gradually come to value social equality and individual freedom as fundamental values. Yet the two values contradict each other. Equality can be ensured only by the freedoms of those who are better off. Guaranteeing that every individual will be free to do as he wishes inevitably short-changes equality. The entire political history of the world since 1789 can be seen as a series of attempts to reconcile this contradiction.

Anyone who has read a novel by Charles Dickens knows that the liberal regimes of nineteenth-century Europe gave priority to individual freedom, even if it meant throwing insolvent poor families in prison and giving orphans little choice but to join schools for pickpockets. Anyone who has read a novel by Alexander Solzhenitsyn knows how Communism's egalitarian ideal produced brutal tyrannies that tried to control every aspect of life.

Contemporary American politics also revolve around this contradiction. Democrats want a more equitable society, even if it means raising taxes and fund programmes to help the poor, elderly and in pain. But that infringes on the freedom of individuals to spend their money as they wish. Republicans should the government force me to buy health insurance if I prefer using the money to put my kids through college? Republicans, on the other hand, want to maximise individual freedom, even if it means that the income gap between rich and poor will grow wider and that many Americans will not be able to afford health care.

Just as medieval culture did not manage to square chivalry with Christianity, so the modern world fails to square liberty with equality. There is no defect. Such contradictions are an inseparable part of every human culture. In fact, they are the engines of cultural development, responsible for the creativity and dynamism of our species. Discord in our thoughts, ideas and values compel us to think, reevaluate and criticise. Consistency is a playground of dull minds. Can you name a single great work of art which is not about conflict?

If tensions, conflicts and irresolvable dilemmas are the spice of every culture, a human being who belongs to any particular culture must hold contradictory beliefs and be riven by incompatible values. It's such an essential feature of any culture that it even has a name: cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is often considered a failure of the human psyche. In fact, it is a vital asset. Had people been unable to hold contradictory beliefs and values, it would probably have been impossible to establish and maintain any human culture.

If, say, a Christian really wants to understand the Muslims who attend that mosque down the street, he shouldn't look for a pristine sect that every Muslim holds dear. Rather, he should enquire into the catch-22s of Muslim culture, those places where rules are at war and where the sacred is at the very spot where the Muslims teeter between two imperatives that you'll understand them best.

The Spy Satellite

Human cultures are in constant flux. Is this flux completely random, or does it have some overall pattern? In other words, does history have a direction?

The answer is yes. Over the millennia, small, simple cultures gradually coalesce into bigger and more complex civilisations, so that there are fewer and fewer mega-cultures, each of which is bigger and more complex. This is of course a very crude generalisation, true only at the macro level. At the micro level, it seems that for every group of cultures that coalesces into a mega-culture, there's a mega-culture that breaks into pieces. The Mongol Empire expanded to dominate a huge swathe of Asia and even parts of Europe, only to shatter into fragments. The Inca converted hundreds of millions of people at the same time that it splintered into innumerable sects. The Latin language spread through western and central Europe, then split into local dialects that themselves eventually became national languages. But these break-ups are temporary reversals in an inexorable trend towards unity.

Perceiving the direction of history is really a question of vantage point. When we adopt the proverbial bird's-eye view of history, which looks at developments in terms of decades or centuries, it's hard to say whether history moves in the direction of unity or of diversity. However, to understand long-term processes the bird's-eye view is too myopic. We would do better to adopt instead the viewpoint of a cosmic spy satellite which scans millennia rather than centuries. From such a vantage point it becomes crystal clear that history is moving relentlessly towards unity. The sectioning of Christianity and the collapse of the Mongol Empire are just speed bumps on history's highway.

The best way to appreciate the general direction of history is to count the number of separate human worlds that coexisted at any given time on planet Earth. Today, we are used to thinking about the whole planet as a single unit, but for most of history, earth was in fact an entire globe of isolated human worlds.

Consider Tasmania, a medium-sized island south of Australia. It was cut off from the Australian mainland in about 10,000 BC as the sea level rose. A few thousand hunter-gatherers were left on the island, and had no contact with any other humans until the arrival of the Europeans in the nineteenth century. For 12,000 years, nobody else knew the Tasmanians were there, and they didn't know who was anyone else in the world. They had their wars, political struggles, social oscillations and cultural developments. Yet as far as the emperors of China or the rulers of Mesopotamia were concerned, Tasmania could just as well have been located on one of Jupiter's moons. The Tasmanians lived in a world of their own.

America and Europe, too, were separate worlds for most of their histories. In AD 378, the Roman emperor Valence was defeated and killed by the Goths at the battle of Adrianople. In the same year, King Chak Tok Ich'aak of Tikal was defeated and killed by the army of Teotihuacan, an important Mayan city state, while Teotihuacan was then the largest city in America, with almost 250,000 inhabitants – of the same order of magnitude as its contemporary, Rome.) There was absolutely no connection between the defeat of Rome and the rise of Teotihuacan. Rome just as well have been located on Mars, and Teotihuacan on Venus.

How many different human worlds coexisted on earth? Around 10,000 BC our planet contained many thousands of them. By 2000 BC they had dwindled to the hundreds, or at most a few thousand. By AD 1450, their numbers had declined even more drastically. At that time, just before the age of European exploration, earth still contained a significant number of dwarf worlds such as Tasmania. But close to 90 per cent of humans lived in a single mega-world: the world of Afro-Asia. Most of Asia, most of Europe, and most of Africa (including substantial chunks of southern Africa) were already connected by agricultural, political and economic ties.

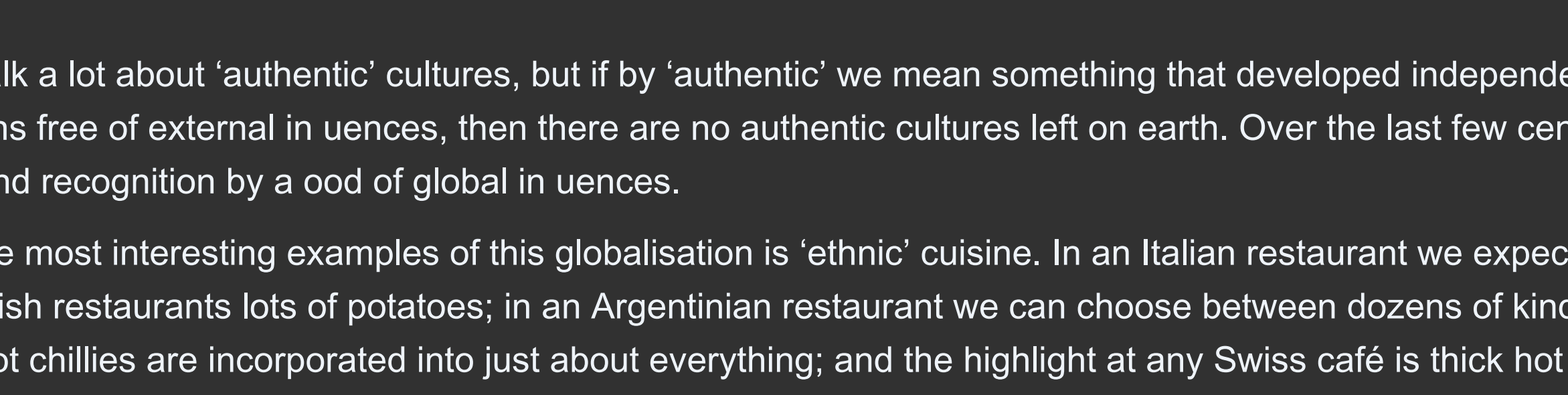
Most of the remaining tenth of the world's human population was divided between four worlds of considerable size and complexity:

1. The Mesoamerican World, which encompassed most of Central America and parts of North America.
2. The Andean World, which encompassed most of western South America.
3. The Australian World, which encompassed the continent of Australia.
4. The Oceanic World, which encompassed most of the islands of the southern Pacific from Hawaii to New Zealand.

Over the next 300 years, the Afro-Asian giant swallowed up all the other worlds. It consumed the Mesoamerican World in 1521, when the Spanish conquistador Cortez conquered the Aztec Empire. It took its first bite out of the Oceanic World at the same time, during Ferdinand Magellan's circumnavigation of the globe, and soon after that completed its conquest. The Andean World collapsed in 1532, when Spanish conquistadors crushed the Inca Empire. The first European landed on the Australian continent in 1606, and that pristine world came to an end when British colonisation began in earnest. Fifteen years later the Britons established their first settlement in Tasmania, thus bringing the last autonomous human world into the Afro-Asian sphere of influence.

It took the Afro-Asian giant several centuries to digest all that it had swallowed, but the process was irreversible. Today almost all humans live in the same geopolitical system (the entire planet is divided into internationally recognised states); the same economic system (capitalist market forces shape even the remotest corners of the globe); the same legal system (human rights and international law are valid everywhere, at least theoretically); and the same scientific system (experts in Iran, Israel, Australia and Argentina have exactly the same views about the structure of atoms or the treatment of tuberculosis).

The single global culture is not homogeneous. Just as a single organic body contains many different kinds of organs and cells, so our culture contains many different types of lifestyles and people, from New York stockbrokers to Afghan shepherds. Yet they are all closely related and they in unison one another in myriad ways. They still argue and fight, but they argue using the same concepts and fight using the same weapons. A real 'clash of civilisations' is like the proverbial dialogue of the deaf. Nobody can grasp what the other is saying. Today when the United States rattle swords at one another, they both speak the language of nation states, capitalist economies, international rights and modern physics.



Map 3. Earth in AD 1450. The named locations within the Afro-Asian World were places visited by the first sixteenth-century Portuguese and Muslim travellers. Beijing, Aachen, Tangier, Morocco, Zanzibar, East Timor, Bukhara, Zanzibar, southern Russia, Central Asia, India, China and Indonesia. The map illustrates the unity of Afro-Asia at the end of the modern eras era.

NeilGower

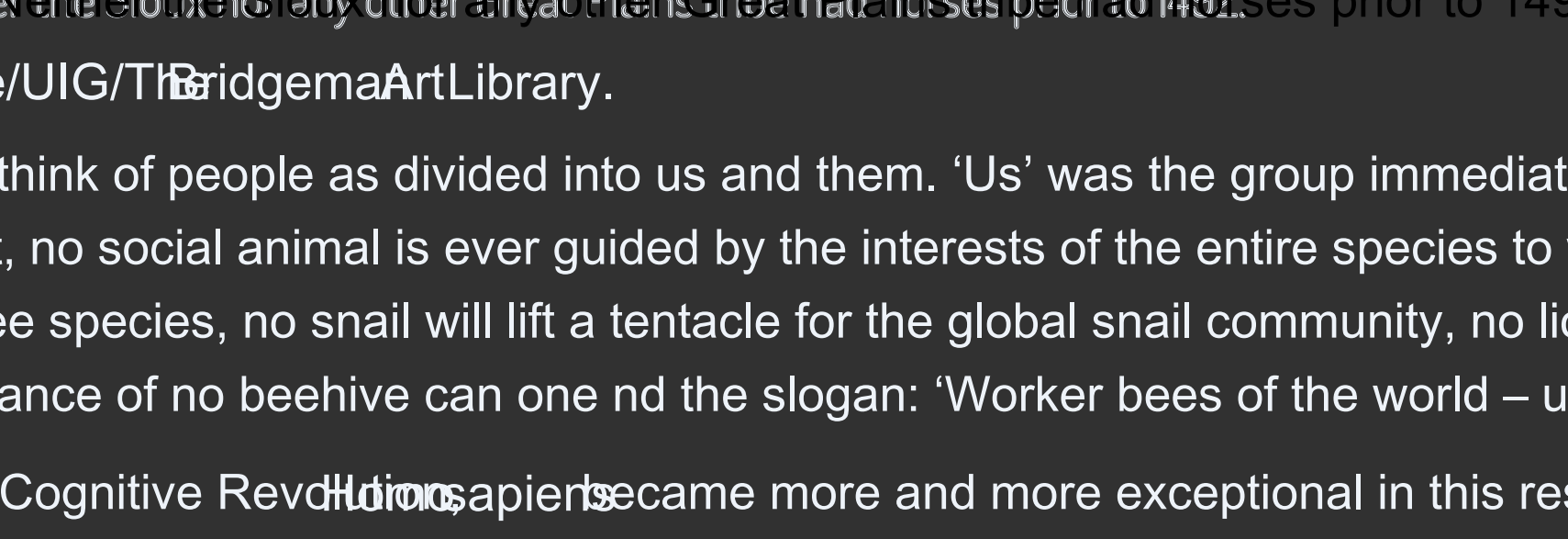
We still talk a lot about 'authentic' cultures, but if by 'authentic' we mean something that developed independently, and that consists of local traditions free of external influences, then there are no authentic cultures left on earth. Over the last few centuries, all cultures were almost beyond recognition by a flood of global influences.

One of the most interesting examples of this globalisation is 'ethnic' cuisine. In an Italian restaurant we expect to find spaghetti in tomato sauce, in a Polish and Irish restaurants lots of potatoes; in an Argentinian restaurant we can choose between dozens of beefsteaks; in an Indian restaurant hot chillies are incorporated into just about everything; and the highlight at any Swiss café is thick hot chocolate under an alpine cream. But none of these foods is native to those nations. Tomatoes, chilli peppers and cocoa are all Mexican in origin; they reached Europe only after the Spaniards conquered Mexico. Julius Caesar and Dante Alighieri never twirled tomato-drenched spaghetti on their forks (even hadn't been invented yet), William Tell never tasted chocolate, and Buddha never spiced up his food with chilli. Potatoes reached Poland no more than 400 years ago. The only steak you could order in Argentina in 1492 was from a llama.

Hollywood films have perpetuated an image of the Plains Indians as brave horsemen, courageously charging the wagons of European settlers to protect the customs of their ancestors. However, these Native American horsemen were not the defenders of some ancient, authentic culture. Instead, they were the product of a major military and political revolution that swept the plains of western North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a consequence of the arrival of European horses. In 1492 there were no horses in America. The culture of the nineteenth-century Sioux and Apache has many appealing features, but it was a modern culture – a result of global culture – much more than 'authentic'.

The Global Vision

From a practical perspective, the most important stage in the process of globalisation occurred in the last few centuries, when empires grew and trade intensified. Ever-tightening links were formed between the people of Afro-Asia, America, Australia and Oceania. Thus Mexican conquistadors made it into Indian food and Spanish cattle began grazing in Argentina. From an ideological perspective, an even more important development occurred during the millennium when the idea of a universal order took root. For thousands of years previously, history was already moving slowly in the direction of global unity, but the idea of a universal order governing the entire world was still alien to most people.



26. Sioux chiefs (c.1850) that the Sioux had only four great chiefs. The painting had been painted to 1492.

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Humans evolved to think of people as divided into us and them. 'Us' was the group immediately around you, whoever you were, and everyone else. In fact, no social animal is ever guided by the interests of the entire species, to which it belongs. No chimpanzee cares for everyone else, no lion will lift a tentacle for the global snail community, no lion alpha male makes a bid for becoming the king of all lions, and at the entrance of no beehive can one find the slogan: 'Worker bees of the world – unite!'

But beginning with the Cognitive Revolution, humans became more and more exceptional in this respect. People began to cooperate on a regular basis with complete strangers, whom they imagined as 'brothers' or 'friends'. Yet this brotherhood was not universal. Somewhere beyond the valley, or beyond the mountain range, one could still sense 'them'. When the first pharaoh, Menes, united Egypt around 3000 it was clear to the Egyptians that Egypt had a border, and beyond the border lurked 'barbarians'. The barbarians were alien, threatening, and interesting only to the extent that they had land or natural resources that the Egyptians wanted. All the imagined orders people created tended to ignore a subset of humankind.

The first millennium BC witnessed the appearance of three potentially universal orders, whose devotees could for the first time imagine the entire world and the entire human race as a single unit governed by a single set of laws. Everyone was 'us', at least potentially. There was no 'them'. The first universal order to appear was economic: the monetary order. The second universal order was political: the imperial order. The third universal order was religious: the order of universal religions such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.

Merchants, conquerors and prophets were the first people who managed to transcend the binary evolutionary division, 'us vs them', and to foresee the potential unity of humankind. For the merchants, the entire world was a single market and all humans were potential customers. They tried to establish an economic order that would apply to all, everywhere. For the conquerors, the entire world was a single empire and all humans were potential subjects, and for the prophets, the entire world held a single truth and all humans were potential believers. They too tried to establish an order that would be applicable for everyone everywhere.

During the last three millennia, people made more and more ambitious attempts to realise that global vision. The next three chapters will explore how money, empires and universal religions spread, and how they laid the foundation of the united world of today. We begin with the story of the greatest conqueror in history, a conqueror possessed of the universal tolerance and adaptability, which consequently made him able to gain the allegiance of all people. This conqueror is a money. People who do not believe in the same god or obey the same king are more than willing to use the money. Osama Bin Laden, for all his hatred of American culture, American religion and American politics, was very fond of American dollars. Money did money succeed where gods and kings failed?