

Chapter 6: Building Pyramids

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind • Yuval Noah Harari

Part 2: Agrarian Anxiety

1 The Burden of the Future: Agrarian Anxiety

- ✓ Foragers rarely worried about the distant future because they lived day-to-day on wild resources, but farmers were consumed by perpetual anxiety about next year's rainfall, pests, and harvest.
- ✓ Agricultural surpluses did not free peasants from poverty; instead, rulers, priests, and soldiers confiscated the surplus food to feed armies and build empires, leaving peasants at subsistence levels.
- ✓ In ancient Egypt, millions of peasants endured backbreaking manual labor for decades to construct the Great Pyramid of Giza, producing monuments that glorified kings rather than improving common lives.



The Great Pyramid of Giza: built by the confiscated caloric surplus of millions.

2 The Imagined Order: Hammurabi vs. Jefferson

- ✓ To coordinate millions of strangers in cities and empires, human societies invented "imagined orders"—shared legal and moral mythologies that people treat as objective cosmic truths.
- ✓ There is no biological basis for human equality or hierarchy; nature knows only diversity and evolution, while concepts like "rights" or "castes" exist entirely in the human imagination.
- ✓ King Hammurabi's Babylonian Code of 1776 BC divided humans into rigid castes (nobles, commoners, slaves), whereas the American Declaration of 1776 claimed all men are created equal—both were powerful shared fictions that stabilized their societies.



Hammurabi's Code Stela: ancient imagined order legitimizing social stratification.

3 How Imagined Orders Are Maintained

- ✓ An imagined order cannot survive on physical violence and police forces alone; it requires that the population genuinely believes its rules are woven into the fabric of reality.
- ✓ Society embeds its core myths directly into the physical landscape through architecture, art, housing designs, and daily social manners.
- ✓ Medieval castles and towering gothic cathedrals physically reinforced the supremacy of God and feudal lords, just as modern skyscrapers of glass and steel reinforce public trust in international banking.

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Part 2: Belief Systems & Summary

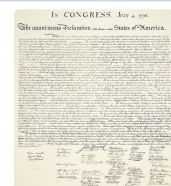
Part 2: Imagined Orders

4 True Believers and the Paradox of Force

- ✓ You cannot run an army, court system, or tax bureau purely through coercion, because the soldiers, judges, and enforcers themselves must believe in the underlying myth to follow orders.
- ✓ If an emperor tries to enforce obedience with gold and threats alone, mercenary soldiers will happily switch sides to whoever pays them more.
- ✓ Roman legions conquered the Mediterranean and endured grueling campaigns not just for daily grain rations, but out of deep, sacred belief in the divine destiny of the Roman Republic and Emperor.

5 The Prison of Shared Fictions

- ✓ There is no escape from imagined reality; when a society dismantles one mythological order through revolution, it inevitably replaces it with a new imagined order to avoid societal collapse.
- ✓ An imagined order is intersubjective, meaning it exists within the collective communication network of millions of people rather than any single individual's mind.
- ✓ When French revolutionaries stormed the Bastille in 1789 to tear down the divine right of Catholic kings, they immediately established a new imagined order based on Human Rights, Nationalism, and the Republic.



American Declaration: founding document of modern egalitarian fictions.

Chapter Summary

- ✓ The Agricultural Revolution created massive food surpluses, but instead of freeing farmers, the surplus was siphoned off to fund the expansion of kings, armies, and monumental state projects.
- ✓ Large-scale cooperation among millions of strangers was achieved not through biological instincts, but through "imagined orders"—shared cultural fictions like Hammurabi's Code and the American Declaration.
- ✓ Imagined orders survive because they are embedded directly into physical architecture, legal codes, and emotional habits, and because ruling elites genuinely believe in their legitimacy.
- ✓ Escaping an imagined order is impossible: whenever human revolutions destroy an old political or religious mythology, they must immediately build a new imagined order to keep civilization from fracturing into chaos.