

Jared Diamond: The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race

Archaeology is demolishing another sacred belief: that human history over the past million years has been a long tale of progress. **Recent discoveries suggest that the adoption of agriculture, supposedly our most decisive step toward a better life, was in many ways a catastrophe from which we have never recovered.** With agriculture came the gross social and sexual inequality, the disease and despotism, that curse our existence.

(The obvious argument against him)

At first, the evidence against this... will strike twentieth century Americans as irrefutable. We're better off in almost every respect than people of the Middle Ages, who in turn had it easier than cavemen, who in turn were better off than apes. Just count our advantages. We enjoy the most abundant and varied foods, the best tools and material goods, some of the longest and healthiest lives, in history. Most of us are safe from starvation and predators. We get our energy from oil and machines, not from our sweat.

[Some go]... so far as to credit agriculture with the remarkable flowering of art that has taken place over the past few thousand years. Since crops can be stored, and since it takes less time to pick food from a garden than to find it in the wild, agriculture gave us free time that hunter-gatherers never had. Thus it was agriculture that enabled us to build the Parthenon.

(His Arguments)

1. Leisure Time

Are twentieth century hunter-gatherers really worse off than farmers? Scattered throughout the world, several dozen groups of so-called primitive people, like the Kalahari bushmen, continue to support themselves that way. It turns out that these people have plenty of leisure time, sleep a good deal, and work less hard than their farming neighbors. For instance, the average time devoted each week to obtaining food is only 12 to 19 hours for one group. One man, when asked why he hadn't [adopted] agriculture, replied, "Why should we, when there are so many mongongo nuts in the world?"

...while post-agricultural technological advances did make new art forms possible and preservation of art easier, great paintings and sculptures were already being produced by hunter-gatherers 15,000 years ago, and were still being produced as recently as the last century by such hunter-gatherers as some Eskimos and the Indians of the Pacific Northwest...

2. Diet & Health (3 arguments)

First, hunter-gatherers enjoyed a varied diet, while early farmers obtained most of their food from one or a few starchy crops. The farmers gained cheap calories at the cost of poor nutrition. (Today just three high-carbohydrate plants - wheat, rice, and corn - provide the bulk of the calories consumed by the human species, yet each one is deficient in certain vitamins or amino acids essential to life.)

Second, because of dependence on a limited number of crops, farmers ran the risk of starvation if one crop failed. (Like the Potato Famine in Ireland that killed millions)

Finally, the mere fact that agriculture encouraged people to clump together in crowded societies, many of which then carried on trade with other crowded societies, led to the spread of parasites and infectious disease. Tuberculosis and diarrheal disease had to await the rise of farming, measles and bubonic plague the appearance of large cities.

4. Social Consequences Class inequality and Sexual inequality

Hunter-gatherers have little or no stored food, and no concentrated food sources, like an orchard or a herd of cows: they live off the wild plants and animals they obtain each day. Therefore, there can be no kings, no class of social parasites who grow fat on food seized from others.

Farming may have encouraged inequality between the sexes, as well. Freed from the need to transport their babies during a nomadic existence, and under pressure to produce more hands to till the fields, farming women tended to have more frequent pregnancies than their hunter-gatherer counterparts - with consequent drains on their health.

Women in agricultural societies were sometimes made beasts of burden. In New Guinea farming communities today I often see women staggering under loads of vegetables and firewood while the men walk empty-handed.

Thus with the advent of agriculture an elite became better off, but most people became worse off.

[Now] we must ask how we got trapped by [farming] despite its pitfalls.

One answer boils down to the adage, "Might makes right." Farming could support many more people than hunting, albeit with a poorer quality of life. Population densities of hunter-gatherers are rarely over one person per ten square miles, while farmers average 100 times that.

A hundred malnourished farmers can still outfight one healthy hunter.

Forced to choose between limiting population or trying to increase food production, [humans] chose the latter and ended up with starvation, warfare, and tyranny. Hunter-gatherers practiced the most successful and longest-lasting life style in human history. In contrast, we're still struggling with the mess into which agriculture has tumbled us, and it's unclear whether we can solve it.