

Food Security: Rethinking The Agricultural Revolution

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The Agricultural, or Neolithic (New-Stone Age) Revolution, marks the birth of modern civilization. Traditional wisdom says that is when we started to become us. That is when we began to grow crops, build cities, develop trade routes, practice specialized crafts and skills, and start the process of becoming the fully evolved species that we have become. That is when we began to move away from being primitive, perhaps even brutish, hunter gatherers who lived on a subsistence diet, constantly on the brink of starvation. That is when we began to conquer and subdue our environment. It was the beginning of a time of great progress and enlightenment. Or was it?

Detail of a miniature of a man ploughing with oxen. Image taken from Bestiary. Written in Latin and French. (Public Domain)

Which Came First: Building Or Agriculture?

Is it time to re-examine what we have all been taught for so long that it is now fully ingrained in our thinking to the point where we scarcely question it anymore? Dare we re-examine such a basic, underlying “fact” of anthropological history? And, to take the idea one step further, did the Agricultural Revolution represent a step forward in our evolution, or was it instead a detriment — a dead end path that, so far at least, has kept us from our real goal of becoming fully evolved, spiritual beings?



This is a radical, but increasingly important, way of thinking that is gathering momentum among serious academics who are increasingly worried about out-of-control population growth. The current, traditional, and generally accepted academic opinion states: When our ancestors joined together to build great megalithic complexes around the world, such as Göbekli Tepe in Anatolia, Eridu, Uruk, and Ur in Mesopotamia, Luoyang on China's central plain, and other ancient cities in various eras, they needed to provide a stable food supply for what soon became a burgeoning population. The debate continues as to which came first, building or agriculture. In other words, did the development of agriculture lead to a sedentary population who soon graduated to an urban civilization? Or did urban civilization create the necessity of agriculture?



From the royal tombs of Ur, the Standard of Ur mosaic, made of lapis lazuli and shell, shows peacetime. (Public Domain)

Most academics are inclined to theorize the former, rather than the latter, explanation. It seems logical to assume that the change to large-scale agriculture led to the growth of cities. But it is important to remember that this became the accepted theory because it *seems logical*, not because it is necessarily deduced from the archaeological record. In truth, the archaeological record could support alternative theories very easily. The hidden truth of the roots of agriculture are complex. It first appears at locations separated by miles, continents, and even oceans, but there is evidence that some cultures, such as a few tribes of western American plains Indians, for instance, even experimented for a while with the basic components of mass agriculture, and then abandoned it for reasons unknown but which might have included the radical idea that the gains in carbohydrate consumption were not worth the costs in practical, ethical, and even moral evolutionary development. In other words, they might have decided that they simply did not function socially as well under the demands of agriculture.

Silencing The Beat Of The City

Stable cities offer both benefits and detriments. Convenience and a stimulating social environment are two benefits. Pollution, overcrowding, crime, and vulnerable infrastructure are only a few of the many drawbacks. If a major disaster caused by earthquakes, volcanoes, exploding comets, or even nuclear accidents were to occur on a massive, world-wide scale, urban locations would be the first to fall. City dwellers are culturally savvy and sophisticated, to be sure. But most have forgotten, if they ever learned them at all, the skills necessary to provide food and shelter if delivery trucks cease to roll for a few weeks, the electrical grid fails, or desperate gangs start to prowl streets no longer guarded by a police force. Without mass agriculture to provide the staples necessary to keep food on the table of city dwellers, the urban environment would grow eerily quiet in only a few weeks. The “beat of the city” would very quickly be replaced by a hollow silence.

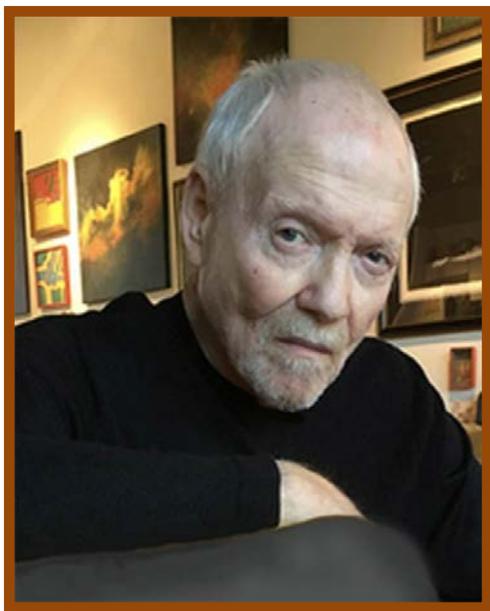
Lifestyle of the Bushmen Hunting (Andy Maano /CC BY-SA 4.0)



Strangely enough, however, the few hunter/gatherer civilizations that still exist on earth in places such as the Amazon or Kalahari would scarcely notice any difference. Their life would go on, untouched by such disasters. And lest we too quickly jump to the conclusion that theirs is a “primitive” lifestyle not worthy of respect, it is important to remember that these communities still produce deep, usually shaman-guided, societies, artwork, and complex mythology. Electric lights and air conditioning are important conveniences, but in no way represent any kind of moral, ethical philosophies equal to a mythology that, in some cases, has stood the test of time for thousands of years.

The Pioneers

Who are some of the modern academics espousing this radical, new way of thinking? In 1992, Daniel Quinn, by sheer dint of effort, was able to circumvent the publishing industry, most of whom saw nothing of value in his work, to publish the first of what became a multi-volume masterpiece called the *Ishmael* series. That was when blind faith in the efficacy of the Agriculture Revolution began to fracture in the popular mindset. People were captured by the opening lines: “*Teacher Seeks Pupil. Must have an earnest desire to save the world. Apply in person.*” It was just a three-line ad in the personals section, but it launched the adventure of a lifetime.



Autor Daniel Quinn (Public Domain)

There are those in the field of anthropology who now say those words marked a dividing line in their life. What was thought by the so-called “experts” in the publishing industry to be a dead-end book about a gorilla who taught a young man about the real meaning of the Agricultural Revolution, rapidly evolved from a cult classic to an award winning, Turner Tomorrow Fellowship-recommended ‘best work of fiction’, which offered a positive solution to global problems. It was a journey of the spirit with practical applications for the evolution of modern life. The basic question it addressed was a simple one, with complex implications: How can we save the world from ourselves?

Jared Diamond must have been listening. He is an American historian, anthropologist, teacher, and author best known for the work he described in his best-selling books *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, *The World Until Yesterday*, and *Upheaval*. In his opinion - and his opinion carries a lot of weight in the academic community - the invention of large-scale agriculture was, without a doubt, the biggest blunder in human history. Now we are stuck with it, so we have to make use of it, but the central problem it created, overpopulation, is the same reason we now need agriculture so desperately. Mass agriculture began a self-perpetuating, systemic problem that now threatens the population of the entire planet.

Haymaking by Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1565) Lobbkowitz Palace. (CC BY-SA 2.0)



The Economy

It is a fact of biology that whenever a species encounters a bountiful food source, its population expands. That is the case throughout all of biological life, from the case of the passenger pigeon, whose numbers exploded after European disease in America took its toll on the indigenous population, leaving overgrown, unworked fields and a perfect habitat for birds, to the buffalo of the western American plains. A bumper crop of acorns one year will produce an increase in the squirrel population the next year. It is simply a fact of nature. So, when humans learned to grow a stable food supply greater than its needs, populations expanded.

That sounds like good news. But it came with a price. Social inequities became the norm. The people who could hoard food grew rich, selling it to those who did not have any. No longer was everyone in the same boat, providing for their immediate family. Now there arose a population of haves and have-nots. It is presently called an "Economy." There were other problems. Decline of nutrition, a rise in infectious diseases contracted from living in close connection with domesticated animals, competition over good fields, which soon led to war between disputing villages, and dependance upon a single food source completely dependent on good weather, were just a few of them.

A man is milking a goat, sowers are sowing seed, as a plowman tills the earth, a young man holds a sickle and a cornucopia lies on the ground. Etching by D. Coornhert after M. van Heemskerck. (Wellcome Images / CC BY-SA 4.0)

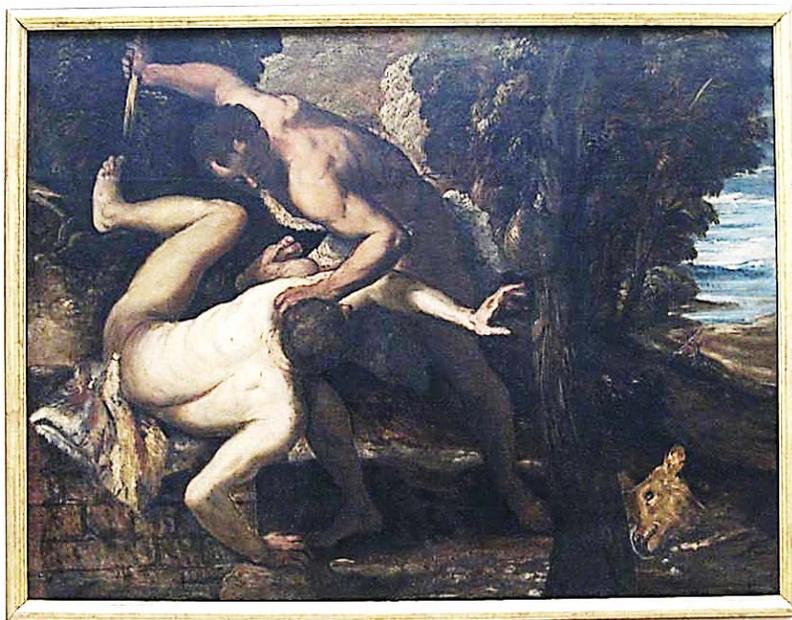


The Worst Mistake In History

As archaeologists began to look more deeply into the times that accompanied the rise of wide-scale farming, they began to reconstruct a crucial stage of human history, shortly concluding that these times might have composed the worst mistake in human history. Large populations were now subject to the whims of nature, as anyone who ever studied the American dust bowl era will immediately conclude. Starvation certainly occurred during the hunter/gatherer age as well, but never on a scale such as this.

Without really understanding what was happening, people, in effect, chose between limiting population size and increasing food supplies. They chose increasing food supply, and ushered in what we now call “History,” that period which began with the invention of writing. It coincides with the beginning of the Agricultural Revolution. Everything earlier is called pre-history. But what we now call “History” has consisted, with only small intervals of peace, of an era of unending warfare, starvation, tyranny, and hardship. Where once the landscape was free and open to small bands of wandering tribes, lines were drawn on maps that signified “mine” and “yours.”

The tale is told metaphorically in the early chapters of the Bible. Cain, the agriculturalist, went to war with his brother Abel, the wandering sheep herder, and killed him. The two radically different lifestyles simply could not coexist. In America, the world of homesteaders who settled down to grow crops could not coexist with the lifestyle of American Indians, who needed room to roam and follow the buffalo herds. Every country on earth has a similar story to tell.



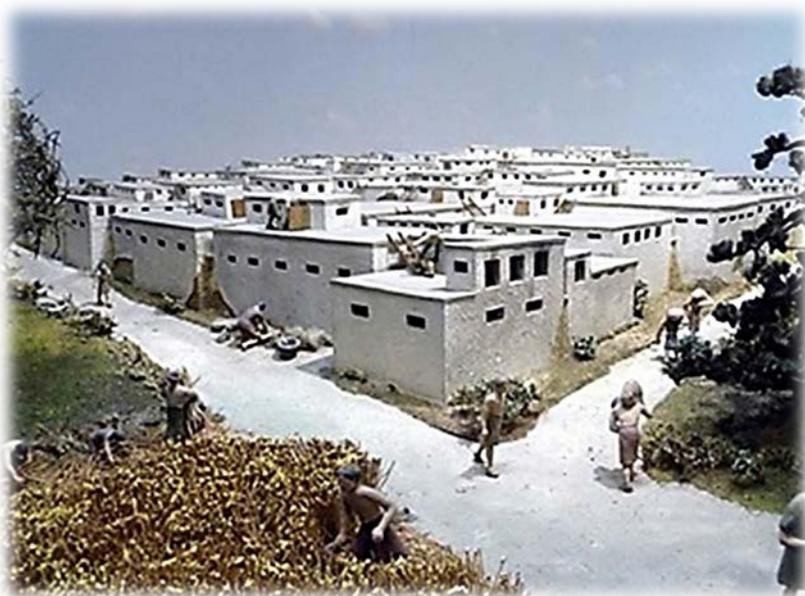
*Cain and Abel by Jacopo Tintoretto in the
Academia Galleries (Venice) (Yair
Haklai/ CC BY-SA 4.0)*

The Priestly Caste

There were other, more far-reaching consequences as well. It is beginning to become apparent that agriculture led to the imposition of formal, organized religious doctrine. Priests were now expected to pray for rain and an increase in crops. Temples were

constructed, and the role of official clergy grew in stature. Farmers were expected to provide a portion of their surplus to feed a growing priestly class, and often were forced to give a tithe, or tenth, of their crops to the church or similar religious establishment. Taxes of grain were owed to the lord who raised armies to protect the fields of the farmers. On and on it went.

A typical case study is now found in western Turkey, in ancient Anatolia. Göbekli Tepe, a magnificent series of stone structures which are only beginning to yield their secrets, might very well be one of the first temples of the new religion that grew in the wake of agriculture in that area. 12,000 years ago, systematic agriculture was invented here, and rapidly spread throughout the entire world. Nearby Çatalhöyük quickly grew to population of a few thousand people. Recently archaeologists have discovered other sites in the area that might even predate Göbekli Tepe by as much as a thousand years.



Model of the Neolithic settlement at Catalhöyük (7300 BC) Museum for Prehistory in Thuringia (Wolfgang Sauber / CC BY-SA 4.0)

Homo Sapiens Sapiens Wise Wise Man

Reza Aslan, author and religious scholar, in his book *God: A Human History*, is unflinching in his arguments about the destructive elements of the

Agricultural Revolution. He writes about the rise of agriculture in Turkey 12,000 to 14,000 years ago, calling it a disaster for our species: *“Human beings actually ended up consuming fewer calories—and certainly fewer proteins—during the Agricultural Revolution than they did when we were hunter-gatherers. We have discovered that the process of farming actually created a whole range of new and, at that time, absolutely novel diseases and problems with human beings”*. In his view, agriculture and the subsequent birth of organized religion is responsible for the inequality that dominates the world today. Surplus food stocks and the advent of ownership in newly settled communities led to wealth accumulation and, ultimately, the stratification of society. *“The Agricultural Revolution may have been a net negative for humanity,”* says Aslan.

What is more difficult to determine, however, is where we would be right now without it. It is almost impossible for us to imagine a world so completely different from our own, even though the vast majority of time the human species has lived on earth since it first evolved has been spent in just such a world.

Our species, *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*, or “twice wise man,” certainly began to evolve some 200,000 years ago, and very probably at least 300,000 years ago. Anyone who has seen 30,000-year-old paintings on the walls of the great caves of western Europe and other places around the globe, rendered thousands of years before agriculture, will recognize right away that these were the work of very sophisticated artists. The fact that megaliths such as Göbekli Tepe arrived on the

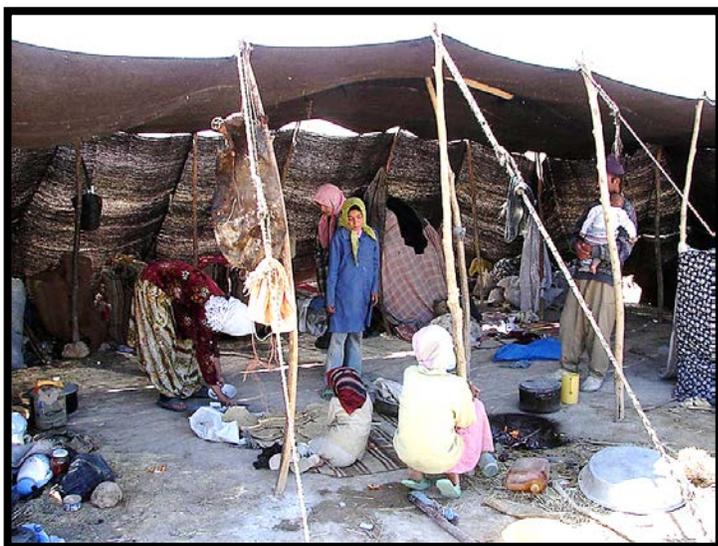
scene overnight, so to speak, fully formed, with no evidence of our species gradually learning how to create such structures let alone how to move mega-ton, carved, stone pillars into complex positions that have stood for more than 10,000 years, proves that we were already a sophisticated species, or at least had help from a sophisticated species, even before the invention of agriculture on a mass scale.

World Peace Existed

This brings up at least two points to consider: If we evolved as a species even as late as 200,000 years ago, a figure accepted by almost all anthropologists, we lived for a long time in a fairly advanced state of sophistication, as evidenced by the art and musical instruments found in the archaeological record. Add to that the fact that we demonstrated remarkable building techniques in crafting the great megaliths that still stand. This is no mean feat for a bunch of starving, brutish, and primitive people. What that means is that for at least 190,000 years, and very probably 290,000 years, we lived in a rather stable, concrete environment. It is only in the last 10,000 years that we begin to find indications of large-scale warfare and instability, as evidenced by walled cities, fortresses, and skeletons showing defensive wounds. That corresponds exactly to the time of the invention of mass agriculture. The implication is that for at least 95% of the time humanity has been on earth, and possibly even 98% of the time, we consisted of a small population that lived a rather peaceful existence. It is only when population figures grew exponentially, after the invention of mass agriculture, that war and instability begin to dominate the archeological record.



*Pillar 43 Göbekli Tepe's Vulture stone
(Public Domain)*



The Nomads' Simple Life by author Hamed Saber from Tehran, Iran (CC BY-SA 2.0)

The second point to ponder is though we lived those eons without electricity, computers, and reliable cold storage, the fact that music and art were a part of our existence indicates a level of contented sophistication. The average nomadic tribe who roamed the countryside at will, free from the ravages of disease-prone Europe during times of plague and warfare, was probably more content than the average American midwestern subsistence farmer during the 1930s.

The Biggest Blunder

Big cities, big families, mass agriculture, and intricate infrastructure offer many conveniences. Central air conditioning, uniform heating systems, remote control devices, and ice cubes available through the doors of our refrigerators, are wonderful things. But they are not necessary. The internet, with its latest bells and whistles, is great. But these things are not the measure of spiritual sophistication and, as we too often see, do not provide happiness and contentment. Sometimes our technology is even put to the most un-sophisticated uses, such as weapons of mass destruction.

If human contentment and growth are measured by technological convenience alone, we have fallen into the trap of evolutionary materialism. We simply have to ask ourselves if that is the projected end of human development. It might even prove to be true that such a material, technological path has taken us far afield from our ultimate destiny of spiritual enrichment. If this is the case, the Agricultural Revolution, whether we invented it ourselves or inherited it from a previous, lost civilization, might indeed be, in the words of Jared Diamond, “the biggest blunder in human history.”

Top Image: The Harvesters by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1565) Brussels (GattoCeliaco /CC BY-SA 4.0)

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