

In his 1999 Discover Magazine article, Jared Diamond called agriculture “...the worst mistake in human history”, and to people at the time it probably seemed like a horrible decision too. Almost universally, living in an agricultural society meant you ate less, worked more, and died earlier. And yet, despite this disparity in quality of life, agriculture and the societies based around it flourished and became widespread. Now it’s almost impossible to name a society not using agriculture to sustain its population. This might seem obvious at first: how else are you going to feed millions of people if you’re not farming for food? An even more important question might be: how did we get to this point? Why are our societies so packed with people?

I’ll start by making a case for nomadic hunting and gathering. Hunter-gatherers were much more healthy than early agriculture adopters. Not only did they eat more, but their diet was much more diverse (imagine eating only boiled/baked wheat products your entire life), and they were much less likely to suffer from nutritional deficiencies. This non-reliance on grains also led to our hunter-gatherers having much healthier teeth: agriculturalists often had to deal with small rock fragments left behind from the grinding process, chipping and damaging their teeth as they ate (in-class example). Their better health also led to hunter-gatherers having a higher life expectancy than their farming counterparts. Not only were they healthier, but they also enjoyed much more social equality; the class hierarchies and arbitrary gender roles that formed in agricultural societies were nearly non-existent. This is not to say there was no social inequality in hunter-gatherer groups, but it didn’t rise to the extreme levels it did in agricultural societies.

If being a hunter-gatherer seems so much better than farming for a living, why did agriculture ultimately dominate? While being a farmer has downsides, there is one very big advantage agriculture has over hunting and gathering: food security. While droughts and other catastrophes still happen, for the most part food supply was much more consistent, even sometimes allowing for a surplus. Farming isn’t easy though, it’s hard work and a team effort. To account for this labor need, having more children was an obvious choice. With more hands to work the land came higher yields, more security, and more surplus. This positive feedback loop likely fed into the explosion of populations that societies based around agriculture were known for. The logic is simple: the more people working, the more food you get. The more food you get the more surplus you have, the more surplus you have the more people you have that don’t need to be farmers. These people can then specialize – making tools, making better ways to make better tools – and increase yield and prosperity, not by farming themselves, but by inventing new technologies. Now agriculture is starting to look a bit more appealing.

While agriculture was initially a step down in individual quality of life from hunting and gathering, the food security, population growth, and subsequent prosperity this large workforce brought about, eventually led to agricultural societies becoming dominant.