UNIT 1:

Was Farming a Good Idea?

About 10,000 years ago, farming, an apparently minor blip on the vast time-line of history, put humans on the road to the complex societies that dominate contemporary life.

Most history books present the coming of farming as perhaps the single most positive event in human history. After all, are not we better off today than hunter-gatherers were, thanks to our clever agrarian ancestors? We do not have to hunt wooly mammoths for meat, forage for roots, chew hides to soften them for clothing, or build our houses from hides, bone, and sinew. Our diets are rich in quantity and variety. Many of us have an abundance of material goods and, in many places, life expectancies have soared. Surely, our lives today are a great improvement over the lives of hunter-gatherers.

As farming provided humans with much greater quantities of food than hunting and gathering could, populations grew. Storage of surpluses made it unnecessary for every woman and man to farm for themselves and their family. Job specialization became possible, with different people specializing in different tasks. Increases in population resulted in increases in social and technical complexity, which in turn led to the first cities, central governments, writing systems, law codes, and monumental buildings. Humans were on their way to the moon!

As for hunter-gatherers, clearly they had been outclassed. Or had they? In trying to understand what hunting and gathering was like, anthropologists today study the few societies of that type that remain in various parts of the world. What they have found is that hunter-gatherers are not necessarily worse off than farmers. In fact,
many of them have plenty of leisure time, get a good night’s sleep, and do not work nearly as hard as people in farming societies, or, for that matter, in big American corporations. For example, in the United States today a full-time work week is from 35 to 40 hours. In many high-powered professions, work weeks are considerably longer.

For hunter-gatherers, however, 12 to 15 hours a week was likely enough on average to supply their food needs. In addition, their diets were considerably more varied and healthier than the diets of settled peoples, who generally relied on high carbohydrate diets of rice, wheat, or potatoes. Hunter-gatherers had a wide array of plants and animals to choose from, so when one species was not available, often many others were.

For farmers, who increasingly relied on a single crop, an attack by locusts or a drastic change in weather could result in famine. Also, while hunter-gatherers moved seasonally from camp to camp following animal herds and leaving their trash and germs behind, farmers remained in one place. Not only did they accumulate garbage, but they also shared housing and diseases with their domesticated animals. A densely populated agrarian community provided the perfect site for a new phenomenon, the disease epidemic.

In addition to the potential for illness and bad health, farming also set in motion forces that have resulted in the development of class divisions and gender inequality. Hunter-gatherers had little opportunity to accumulate possessions. They carried only what was necessary for their immediate needs. Settled peoples, however, could begin to accumulate possessions, and with possessions came the potential for class divisions. Suddenly there were the “haves” and the “have-nots,” with the “haves” generally believing themselves entitled to order the “have-nots” around.
As for social relations between men and women, hunter-gatherer women had only a few pregnancies, and children were spaced out by about four years. That was because at four years-old a child could walk on its own as the band moved from place to place. In farming communities where women stayed put, pregnancies usually came closer together so that family size increased. Recovering from a greater number of pregnancies and caring for the needs of a larger family, women became tied to the home in ways that hunter-gatherer women were not.

There is no question that the development of settled agrarian societies set us humans on a path that has brought us to the highly advanced and technologically sophisticated way of life we enjoy today. Yet, as we look back in history to the time when the hunter-gatherer way of life was common all around the globe, we may feel a bit wistful about a lost way of life.
Was Farming A Good Idea? – Questions:

1. Identify the point of view of the author of Student Handout 2.1. What evidence in the reading supports your groups’ findings? How would you rewrite the article to make it reflect another point of view or to make it as objective as possible?

2. Take a piece of notebook paper and fold it in half vertically. On one side write, “Hunter-Gatherer Way of Life,” and on the other side write, “Settled Farming.” Then fold your paper in half horizontally. On the top half write “advantages” and on the bottom half “disadvantages.” Write as many advantages and disadvantages for each way of life as you can think of. Several are mentioned in the reading, but add any others that come to mind.

3. Once your group has come up with your advantages and disadvantages, get with another group to compare lists.

4. Final Assessment: Using the provided lined paper, write a paragraph discussing whether or not you agree or disagree that the coming of farming was a good idea, giving at least 3 reasons for your point of view.