Agriculture, the indispensable basis of civilization, was originally encountered as time, language, number and art won out. As the materialization of alienation, agriculture is the triumph of estrangement and the definite divide between culture and nature and humans from each other.

Agriculture is the birth of production, complete with its essential features and deformation of life and consciousness. The land itself becomes an instrument of production and the planet’s species its objects. Wild or tame, weeds or crops speak of that duality that cripples the soul of our being, ushering in, relatively quickly, the despotism, war and impoverishment of high civilization over the great length of that earlier oneness with nature. The forced march of civilization, which Adorno recognized in the “assumption of an irrational catastrophe at the beginning of history,” which Freud felt as “something imposed on a resisting majority,” of which Stanley Diamond found only “conscripts, not volunteers,” was dictated by agriculture. And Mircea Eliade was correct to assess its coming as having “provoked upheavals and spiritual breakdowns” whose magnitude the modern mind cannot imagine. “To level off, to standardize the human landscape, to efface its irregularities and ban-
ish its surprises,” these words of E.M. Cioran apply perfectly to the logic of agriculture, the end of life as mainly sensuous activity, the embodiment and generator of separated life. Artificiality and work have steadily increased since its inception and are known as culture: in domesticating animals and plants man necessarily domesticated himself. Historical time, like agriculture, is not inherent in social reality but an imposition on it. The dimension of time or history is a function of repression, whose foundation is production or agriculture. Hunter-gatherer life was anti-time in its simultaneous and spontaneous openness; farming life generates a sense of time by its successive-task narrowness, its directed routine. As the non-closure and variety of Paleolithic living gave way to the literal enclosure of agriculture, time assumed power and came to take on the character of an enclosed space. Formalized temporal reference points — ceremonies with fixed dates, the naming of days, etc. — are crucial to the ordering of the world of production; as a schedule of production, the calendar is integral to civilization. Conversely, not only would industrial society be impossible without time schedules, the end of agriculture (basis of all production) would be the end of historical time.

Representation begins with language, a means of reining in desire. By displacing autonomous images with verbal symbols, life is reduced and brought under strict control; all direct, unmediated experience is subsumed by that supreme mode of symbolic expression, language. Language cuts up and organizes reality, as Benjamin Whorf put it, and this segmentation of nature, an aspect of grammar, sets the stage for agriculture. Julian Jaynes, in fact, concluded that the new linguistic mentality led very directly to agriculture. Unquestionably, the crystallization of language into writing, called forth mainly by the need for record-keeping of agricultural transactions, is the signal that civilization has begun. In the non-commodified, egalitarian hunter-gatherer ethos, the basis of which (as has so often been remarked) was sharing, number was not wanted. There was no ground for the urge to quantify, no rea-

rowed from agriculture to defoliate millions of acres in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, but the plundering of the biosphere proceeds even more lethally in its daily, global forms. Food as a function of production has also failed miserably on the most obvious level: half of the world, as everyone knows, suffers from malnourishment ranging to starvation itself.

Meanwhile, the “diseases of civilization,” as discussed by Eaton and Konner in the January 31, 1985 New England Journal of Medicine and contrasted with the healthful pre-farming diets, underline the joyless, sickly world of chronic maladjustment we inhabit as prey of the manufacturers of medicine, cosmetics, and fabricated food. Domestication reaches new heights of the pathological in genetic food engineering, with new types of animals in the offering as well as contrived microorganisms and plants. Logically, humanity itself will also become a domesticate of this order as the world of production processes us as much as it degrades and deforms every other natural system.

The project of subduing nature, begun and carried through by agriculture, has assumed gigantic proportions. The “success” of civilization’s progress, a success earlier humanity never wanted, tastes more and more like ashes. James Serpell summed it up this way: “In short we appear to have reached the end of the line. We cannot expand; we seem unable to intensify production without wreaking further havoc, and the planet is fast becoming a wasteland.” Physiologist Jared Diamond termed the initiation of agriculture “a catastrophe from which we have never recovered.” Agriculture has been and remains a “catastrophe” at all levels, the one which underpins the entire material and spiritual culture of alienation now destroying us. Liberation is impossible without its dissolution.
thesesystemsas,increasingly,farmanimalsarekeptlargelyimmo-
bile throughout their deformed lives, maintained in high-density,
wholly artificial environments. Billions of chickens, pigs, and veal
calves, for example, no longer even see the light of day much less
roam the fields, fields growing more silent as more and more pas-
tures are plowed up to grow feed for these hideously confined be-
ings.

The high-tech chickens, whose beak ends have been clipped off
to reduce death from stress-induced fighting, often exist four or
even five to a 12” by 18” cage and are periodically deprived of food
and water for up to ten days to regulate their egg-laying cycles. Pigs
live on concrete floors with no bedding; foot-rot, tail-biting and
cannibalism are endemic because of physical conditions and stress.
Sows nurse their piglets separated by metal grates, mother and off-
spring barred from natural contact. Veal calves are often raised in
darkness, chained to stalls so narrow as to disallow turning around
or other normal posture adjustment. These animals are generally
under regimens of constant medication due to the tortures involved
and their heightened susceptibility to diseases; automated animal
production relies upon hormones and antibiotics. Such systematic
cruelty, not to mention the kind of food that results, brings to mind
the fact that captivity itself and every form of enslavement has agri-
culture as its progenitor or model. Food has been one of our most
direct contacts with the natural environment, but we are rendered
increasingly dependent on a technological production system in
which finally even our senses have become redundant; taste, once
vital for judging a food’s value or safety, is no longer experienced,
but rather certified by a label. Overall, the healthfulness of what we
consume declines and land once cultivated for food now produces
coffee, tobacco, grains for alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs, cre-
ating the context for famine. Even the non-processed foods like
fruits and vegetables are now grown to be tasteless and uniform
because the demands of handling, transport and storage, not nu-
itrition or pleasure, are the highest considerations. Total war bor-
son to divide what was whole. Not until the domestication of an-
imals and plants did this cultural concept fully emerge. Two of
number’s seminal figures testify clearly to its alliance with separa-
tateness and property: Pythagoras, center of a highly influential
religious cult of number, and Euclid, father of mathematics and
science, whose geometry originated to measure fields for reasons
of ownership, taxation and slave labor. One of civilization’s early
forms, chieftainship, entails a linear rank order in which each mem-
ber is assigned an exact numerical place. Soon, following the anti-
natural linearity of plow culture, the inflexible 90-degree gridiron
plan of even earliest cities appeared. Their insistent regularity con-
stitutes in itself a repressive ideology. Culture, now numberized, be-
comes more firmly bounded and lifeless. Art, too, in its relationship
to agriculture, highlights both institutions. It begins as a means to
interpret and subdue reality, to rationalize nature, and conforms
to the great turning point which is agriculture in its basic features.
The pre-Neolithic cave paintings, for example, are vivid and bold,
a dynamic exaltation of animal grace and freedom. The neolithic art
of farmers and pastoralists, however, stiffens into stylized forms;
Franz Borkenau typified its pottery as a “narrow, timid botching
of materials and forms.” With agriculture, art lost its variety and
became standardized into geometric designs that tended to degen-
erate into dull, repetitive patterns, a perfect reflection of standard-
ized, confined, rule-patterned life. And where there had been no
representation in Paleolithic art of men killing men, an obsession
with depicting confrontation between people advanced with the
Neolithic period, scenes of battles becoming common. Time, lan-
guage, number, art and all the rest of culture, which predates and
leads to agriculture, rests on symbolization. Just as autonomy pre-
ceded domestication and self-domestication, the rational and the
social precede the symbolic. Food production, it is eternally and
gratefully acknowledged, “permitted the cultural potentiality of
the human species to develop.” But what is this tendency toward
the symbolic, toward the elaboration and imposition of arbitrary
forms? It is a growing capacity for objectification, by which what is living becomes reified, thing-like. Symbols are more than the basic units of culture; they are screening devices to distance us from our experiences. They classify and reduce, “to do away with,” in Leakey and Lewin’s remarkable phrase, “the otherwise almost intolerable burden of relating one experience to another.” Thus culture is governed by the imperative of reforming and subordinating nature. The artificial environment which is agriculture accomplished this pivotal mediation, with the symbolism of objects manipulated in the construction of relations of dominance. For it is not only external nature that is subjugated: the face-to-face quality of pre-agricultural life in itself severely limited domination, while culture extends and legitimizes it.

It is likely that already during the Paleolithic era certain forms or names were attached to objects or ideas, in a symbolizing manner but in a shifting, impermanent, perhaps playful sense. The will to sameness and security found in agriculture means that the symbols became as static and constant as farming life. Regularization, rule patterning, and technological differentiation, under the sign of division of labor, interact to ground and advance symbolization. Agriculture completes the symbolic shift and the virus of alienation has overcome authentic, free life. It is the victory of cultural control; as anthropologist Marshall Sahlins puts it, “The amount of work per capita increases with the evolution of culture and the amount of leisure per capita decreases.”

Today, the few surviving hunter-gatherers occupy the least ‘economically interesting’ areas of the world where agriculture has not penetrated, such as the snows of the Inuit or desert of the Australian aborigines. And yet the refusal of farming drudgery, even in adverse settings, bears its own rewards. The Hazda of Tanzania, Filipino Tasaday, !Kung of Botswana, or the Kalahari Desert !Kung—who were seen by Richard Lee as easily surviving a serious, several years’ drought while neighboring farmers starved—also testify to Hole and Flannery’s summary that “No group on earth has Asia, Latin America and Africa as victims of the program that fosters large corporate farms. It amounted to an enormous technological colonization creating dependency on capital-intensive agribusiness, destroying older agrarian communalism, requiring massive fossil fuel consumption and assaulting nature on an unprecedented scale. Desertification, or loss of soil due to agriculture, has been steadily increasing. Each year, a total area equivalent to more than two Belgians is being converted to desert worldwide. The fate of the world’s tropical rainforests is a factor in the acceleration of this desiccation: half of them have been erased in the past thirty years. In Botswana, the last wilderness region of Africa has disappeared like much of the Amazon jungle and almost half of the rainforests of Central America, primarily to raise cattle for the hamburger markets in the U.S. and Europe. The few areas safe from deforestation are where agriculture doesn’t want to go. The destruction of the land is proceeding in the U.S. over a greater land area than was encompassed by the original thirteen colonies, just as it was at the heart of the severe African famine of the mid-1980s, and the extinction of one species of wild animal and plant after another.

Returning to animals, one is reminded of the words of Genesis in which God said to Noah, “And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hands are they delivered.” When newly discovered territory was first visited by the advance guard of production, as a wide descriptive literature shows, the wild mammals and birds showed no fear whatsoever of the explorers. The agriculturalized mentality, however, so aptly foretold in the biblical passage, projects an exaggerated belief in the fierceness of wild creatures, which follows from progressive estrangement and loss of contact with the animal world, plus the need to maintain dominance over it.

The fate of domestic animals is defined by the fact that agricultural technologists continually look to factories as models of how to refine their own production systems. Nature is banished from
Regarding the latter, some are promoted with devastating results to the land; along with cotton and soybeans, corn, which in its present domesticated state is totally dependent on agriculture for its existence, is especially bad. J. Russell Smith called it “the killer of continents...and one of the worst enemies of the human future.” The erosion cost of one bushel of Iowa corn is two bushels of topsoil, highlighting the more general large-scale industrial destruction of farmland. The continuous tillage of huge monocultures, with massive use of chemicals and no application of manure or humus, obviously raises soil deterioration and soil loss to much higher levels. The dominant agricultural mode has it that soil needs massive infusions of chemicals, supervised by technicians whose overriding goal is to maximize production. Artificial fertilizers and all the rest from this outlook eliminate the need for the complex life of the soil and indeed convert it into a mere instrument of production. The promise of technology is total control, a completely contrived environment that simply supersedes the natural balance of the biosphere.

But more and more energy is expended to purchase great monocultural yields that are beginning to decline, never mind the toxic contamination of the soil, ground water and food. The U.S. Department of Agriculture says that cropland erosion is occurring in this country at a rate of two billion tons of soil a year. The National Academy of Sciences estimates that over one third of topsoil is already gone forever. The ecological imbalance caused by monocropping and synthetic fertilizers causes enormous increases in pests and crop diseases; since World War II, crop loss due to insects has actually doubled. Technology responds, of course, with spiraling applications of more synthetic fertilizers, and “weed” and “pest” killers, accelerating the crime against nature.

Another post-war phenomenon was the Green Revolution, billed as the salvation of the impoverished Third World by American capital and technology. But rather than feeding the hungry, the Green Revolution drove millions of poor people from farmlands in more leisure time than hunters and gatherers, who spend it primarily on games, conversation and relaxing.” Service rightly attributed this condition to “the very simplicity of the technology and lack of control over the environment” of such groups. And yet simple Paleolithic methods were, in their own way, “advanced.” Consider a basic cooking technique like steaming foods by heating stones in a covered pit; this is immemorially older than any pottery, kettles or baskets (in fact, is anti-container in its non-surplus, non-exchange orientation) and is the most nutritionally sound way to cook, far healthier than boiling food in water, for example. Or consider the fashioning of such stone tools as the long and exceptionally thin “laurel leaf” knives, delicately chipped but strong, which modern industrial techniques cannot duplicate. The hunting and gathering lifestyle represents the most successful and enduring adaptation ever achieved by humankind. In occasional pre-agriculture phenomena like the intensive collection of food or the systematic hunting of a single species can be seen signs of impending breakdown of a pleasurable mode that remained so static for so long precisely because it was pleasurable. The “penury and day-long grind” of agriculture, in Clark’s words, is the vehicle of culture, “rational” only in its perpetual disequilibrium and its logical progression toward ever-greater destruction, as will be outlined below.

Although the term hunter-gatherer should be reversed (and has been by not a few current anthropologists) because it is recognized that gathering constitutes by far the larger survival component, the nature of hunting provides salient contrast to domestication. The relationship of the hunter to the hunted animal, which is sovereign, free and even considered equal, is obviously qualitatively different from that of the farmer or herdsman to the enslaved chattels over which he rules absolutely. Evidence of the urge to impose order or subjugate is found in the coercive rites and uncleanness taboos of incipient religion. The eventual subduing of the world that is agriculture has at least some of its basis where ambiguous behavior is ruled out, purity and defilement defined and enforced. Lévi-Strauss
defined religion as the anthropomorphism of nature; earlier spirituality was participatory with nature, not imposing cultural values or traits upon it. The sacred means that which is separated, and ritual and formalization, increasingly removed from the ongoing activities of daily life and in the control of such specialists as shamans and priests, are closely linked with hierarchy and institutionalized power. Religion emerges to ground and legitimize culture, by means of a “higher” order of reality; it is especially required, in this function of maintaining the solidarity of society, by the unnatural demands of agriculture. In the Neolithic village of Catal Hüyük in Turkish Anatolia, one of every three rooms was used for ritual purposes. Plowing and sowing can be seen as ritual renunciations, according to Burkert, a form of systematic repression accompanied by a sacrificial element. Speaking of sacrifice, which is the killing of domesticated animals (or even humans) for ritual purposes, it is pervasive in agricultural societies and found only there. Some of the major Neolithic religions often attempted a symbolic healing of the agricultural rupture with nature through the mythology of the earth mother, which needless to say does nothing to restore the lost unity. Fertility myths are also central; the Egyptian Osiris, the Greek Persephone, Baal of the Canaanites, and the New Testament Jesus, gods whose death and resurrection testify to the perseverance of the soil, not to mention the human soul. The first temples signified the rise of cosmologies based on a model of the universe as an arena of domestication or barnyard, which in turn serves to justify the suppression of human autonomy. Whereas precivilized society was, as Redfield put it, “held together by largely undeclared but continually realized ethical conceptions,” religion developed as a way of creating citizens, placing the moral order under public management.

Domestication involved the initiation of production, vastly increased divisions of labor, and the completed foundations of social stratification. This amounted to an epochal mutation both in the character of human existence and its development, clouding the in Wisconsin or frozen fish sticks from a single factory in Sweden. A few big multinationals such as Unilever, the world’s biggest food production company, preside over a highly integrated service system in which the object is not to nourish or even to feed, but to force an ever-increasing consumption of fabricated, processed products upon the world.

When Descartes enunciated the principle that the fullest exploitation of matter to any use is the whole duty of man, our separation from nature was virtually complete and the stage was set for the Industrial Revolution. Three hundred and fifty years later this spirit lingered in the person of Jean Vorst, Curator of France’s Museum of Natural History, who pronounced that our species, “because of intellect,” can no longer re-cross a certain threshold of civilization and once again become part of a natural habitat. He further stated, expressing perfectly the original and persevering imperialism of agriculture, “As the earth in its primitive state is not adapted to our expansion, man must shackle it to fulfill human destiny.” The early factories literally mimicked the agricultural model, indicating again that at base all mass production is farming. The natural world is to be broken and forced to work. One thinks of the mid-American prairies where settlers had to yoke six oxen to plows in order to cut through the soil for the first time. Or a scene from the 1870s in The Octopus by Frank Norris, in which gangplows were driven like “a great column of field artillery” across the San Joaquin Valley, cutting 175 furrows at once. Today the organic, what is left of it, is fully mechanized under the aegis of a few petrochemical corporations. Their artificial fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and near-monopoly of the world’s seed stock define a total environment that integrates food production from planting to consumption. Although Lévi-Strauss is right that “Civilization manufactures monoculture like sugar beets,” only since World War II has a completely synthetic orientation begun to dominate.

Agriculture takes more organic matter out of the soil than it puts back, and soil erosion is basic to the monoculture of annuals. Re-
Cancer, coronary thrombosis, anemia, dental caries, and mental disorders are but a few of the hallmarks of agriculture; previously women gave birth with no difficulty and little or no pain. People were far more alive in all their senses. !Kung San, reported R.H. Post, have heard a single-engine plane while it was still 70 miles away, and many of them can see four moons of Jupiter with the naked eye. The summary judgment of Harris and Ross, as to “an overall decline in the quality—and probably in the length—of human life among farmers as compared with earlier hunter-gatherer groups,” is understated.

One of the most persistent and universal ideas is that there was once a Golden Age of innocence before history began. Hesiod, for instance, referred to the “life-sustaining soil, which yielded its copious fruits unbribed by toil.” Eden was clearly the home of the hunter-gatherers and the yearning expressed by the historical images of paradise must have been that of disillusioned tillers of the soil for a lost life of freedom and relative ease.

The history of civilization shows the increasing displacement of nature from human experience, characterized in part by a narrowing of food choices. According to Rooney, prehistoric peoples found sustenance in over 1500 species of wild plants, whereas “All civilizations,” Wenke reminds us, “have been based on the cultivation of one or more of just six plant species: wheat, barley, millet, rice, maize, and potatoes.” It is a striking truth that over the centuries “the number of different edible foods which are actually eaten,” Pyke points out, “has steadily dwindled.” The world’s population now depends for most of its subsistence on only about 20 genera of plants while their natural strains are replaced by artificial hybrids and the genetic pool of these plants becomes far less varied.

The diversity of food tends to disappear or flatten out as the proportion of manufactured foods increases. Today the very same articles of diet are distributed worldwide, so that an Inuit Eskimo and an African may soon be eating powdered milk manufactured latter with ever more violence and work. Contrary to the myth of hunter-gatherers as violent and aggressive, by the way, recent evidence shows that existing non-farmers, such as the Mbuti (“pygmies”) studied by Turnbull, apparently do what killing they do without any aggressive spirit, even with a sort of regret. Warfare and the formation of every civilization or state, on the other hand, are inseparably linked.

Primal peoples did not fight over areas in which separate groups might converge in their gathering and hunting. At least “territorial” struggles are not part of the ethnographic literature and they would seem even less likely to have occurred in pre-history when resources were greater and contact with civilization non-existent. Indeed, these peoples had no conception of private property, and Rousseau’s figurative judgment, that divided society was founded by the man who first sowed a piece of ground, saying “This land is mine,” and found others to believe him, is essentially valid. “Mine and thine, the seeds of all mischief, have no place with them,” reads Pietro’s 1511 account of the natives encountered on Columbus’ second voyage. Centuries later, surviving Native Americans asked, “Sell the Earth? Why not sell the air, the clouds, the great sea?” Agriculture creates and elevates possessions; consider the longing root of belongings, as if they ever make up for the loss. Work, as a distinct category of life, likewise did not exist until agriculture. The human capacity of being shackled to crops and herds devolved rather quickly. Food production overcame the common absence or paucity of ritual and hierarchy in society and introduced civilized activities like the forced labor of temple-building. Here is the real “Cartesian split” between inner and outer reality, the separation whereby nature became merely something to be “worked.” On this capacity for a sedentary and servile existence rests the entire superstructure of civilization with its increasing weight of repression. Male violence toward women originated with agriculture, which transmuted women into beasts of burden and breeders of children. Before farming, the egalitarianism of foraging life “applied as fully
to women as to men,” judged Eleanor Leacock, owing to the autonomy of tasks and the fact that decisions were made by those who carried them out. In the absence of production and with no drudge work suitable for child labor such as weeding, women were not consigned to onerous chores or the constant supply of babies. Along with the curse of perpetual work, via agriculture, in the expulsion from Eden, God told woman, “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and that desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.” Similarly, the first known codified laws, those of the Sumerian king Ur-Namu, prescribed death to any woman satisfying desires outside of marriage. Thus Whyte referred to the ground women “lost relativeto men when humans first abandoned a simple hunting and gathering way of life,” and Simone de Beauvoir saw in the cultural equation of plow and phallus a fitting symbol of the oppression of women.

As wild animals are converted into sluggish meat-making machines, the concept of becoming “cultivated” is a virtue enforced on people, meaning the weeding out of freedom from one’s nature, in the service of domestication and exploitation. As Rice points out, in Sumer, the first civilization, the earliest cities had factories with their characteristic high organization and refraction of skills. Civilization from this point exacts human labor and the mass production of food, buildings, war and authority. To the Greeks, work was a curse and nothing else. Their name for it-ponos—has the same root as the Latin poena, sorrow. The famous Old Testament curse on agriculture as the expulsion from Paradise (Genesis 3:17–18) reminds us of the origin of work. As Mumford put it, “Conformity, repetition, patience were the keys to this [Neolithic] culture...the patient capacity for work.” In this monotony and passivity of tending and waiting is born, according to Paul Shepard, the peasant’s “deep, latent resentments, crude mixtures of rectitude and heavi

...
to plant. True to culture, showing that it is complete from the beginning of production, the Naga kept their varieties so pure “only by a fanatical adherence to an ideal type.” This exemplifies the marriage of culture and production in domestication, and its inevitable progeny, repression and work.

The scrupulous tending of strains of plants finds its parallel in the domesticating of animals, which also defies natural selection and re-establishes the controllable organic world at a debased, artificial level. Like plants, animals are mere things to be manipulated; a dairy cow, for instance, is seen as a kind of machine for converting grass to milk. Transmuted from a state of freedom to that of helpless parasites, these animals become completely dependent on man for survival. In domestic mammals, as a rule, the size of the brain becomes relatively smaller as specimens are produced that devote more energy to growth and less to activity. Placid, infantilized, typified perhaps by the sheep, most domesticated of herd animals; the remarkable intelligence of wild sheep is completely lost in their tamed counterparts. The social relationships among domestic animals are reduced to the crudest essentials. Non-reproductive parts of the life cycle are minimized, courtship is curtailed, and the animal’s very capacity to recognize its own species is impaired.

Farming also created the potential for rapid environmental destruction and the domination over nature soon began to turn the green mantle that covered the birthplaces of civilization into barren and lifeless areas. “Vast regions have changed their aspect completely,” estimates Zeuner, “always to quasi-drier condition, since the beginnings of the Neolithic.” Deserts now occupy most of the areas where the high civilizations once flourished, and there is much historical evidence that these early formations inevitably ruined their environments.

Throughout the Mediterranean Basin and in the adjoining Near East and Asia, agriculture turned lush and hospitable lands into depleted, dry, and rocky terrain. In Critias, Plato described Attica as “a skeleton wasted by disease,” referring to the deforestation of
palatable, or more secure food base.” Thus the consensus question
now is, “Why was it adopted at all?”

Many theories have been advanced, none convincingly. Childe
and others argue that population increase pushed human societies
into more intimate contact with other species, leading to domes-
tication and the need to produce in order to feed the additional
people. But it has been shown rather conclusively that population
increase did not precede agriculture but was caused by it. “I
don’t see any evidence anywhere in the world,” concluded Flan-
nerly, “that suggests that population pressure was responsible for
the beginning of agriculture.” Another theory has it that major cli-
matic changes occurred at the end of the Pleistocene, about 11,000
years ago, that upset the old hunter-gatherer life-world and led di-
rectly to the cultivation of certain surviving staples. Recent dating
methods have helped demolish this approach; no such climatic shift
happened that could have forced the new mode into existence. Be-
sides, there are scores of examples of agriculture being adopted-or
refused-in every type of climate. Another major hypothesis is that
agriculture was introduced via a chance discovery or invention as
if it had never occurred to the species before a certain moment that,
for example, food grows from sprouted seeds. It seems certain that
Paleolithic humanity had a virtually inexhaustible knowledge of
flora and fauna for many tens of thousands of years before the cul-
tivation of plants began, which renders this theory especially weak.
Agreement with Carl Sauer’s summation that, “Agriculture did not
originate from a growing or chronic shortage of food” is sufficient,
in fact, to dismiss virtually all originary theories that have been
advanced. A remaining idea, presented by Hahn, Isaac and others,
holds that food production began at base as a religious activity. This
hypothesis comes closest to plausibility.

Sheep and goats, the first animals to be domesticated, are known
to have been widely used in religious ceremonies, and to have been
raised in enclosed meadows for sacrificial purposes. Before they
were domesticated, moreover, sheep had no wool suitable for tex-
tile purposes. The main use of the hen in southeastern Asia and the
eastern Mediterranean—the earliest centers of civilization—seems
to have been,” according to Darby, “sacrificial or divinatory rather
than alimentary.” Sauer adds that the “egg laying and meat pro-
ducing qualities” of tamed fowl “are relatively late consequences
of their domestication.” Wild cattle were fierce and dangerous; nei-
ther the docility of oxen nor the modified meat texture of such
castrates could have been foreseen. Cattle were not milked until
centuries after their initial captivity, and representations indicate
that their first known harnessing was to wagons in religious pro-
cessions. Plants, next to be controlled, exhibit similar backgrounds
so far as is known. Consider the New World examples of squash
and pumpkin, used originally as ceremonial rattles. Johannessen
discussed the religious and mystical motives connected with the
domestication of maize, Mexico’s most important crop and center
of its native Neolithic religion. Likewise, Anderson investigated the
selection and development of distinctive types of various cultivated
plants because of their magical significance. The shamans, I should
add, were well-placed in positions of power to introduce agricul-
ture via the taming and planting involved in ritual and religion,
sketchily referred to above. Though the religious explanation of
the origins of agriculture has been somewhat overlooked, it brings
us, in my opinion, to the very doorstep of the real overlooked, it brings
us, in my opinion, to the very doorstep of the real explanation of
the birth of production: that non-rational, cultural force of alien-
ation which spread, in the forms of time, language, number and
art, to ultimately colonize material and psychic life in agriculture.
“Religion” is too narrow a conceptualization of this infection and its
growth. Domination is too weighty, too all-encompassing to have
been solely conveyed by the pathology that is religion.

But the cultural values of control and uniformity that are part of
religion are certainly part of agriculture, and from the beginning.
Noting that strains of corn cross-pollinate very easily, Anderson
studied the very primitive agriculturalists of Assam, the Naga tribe,
and their variety of corn that exhibited no differences from plant