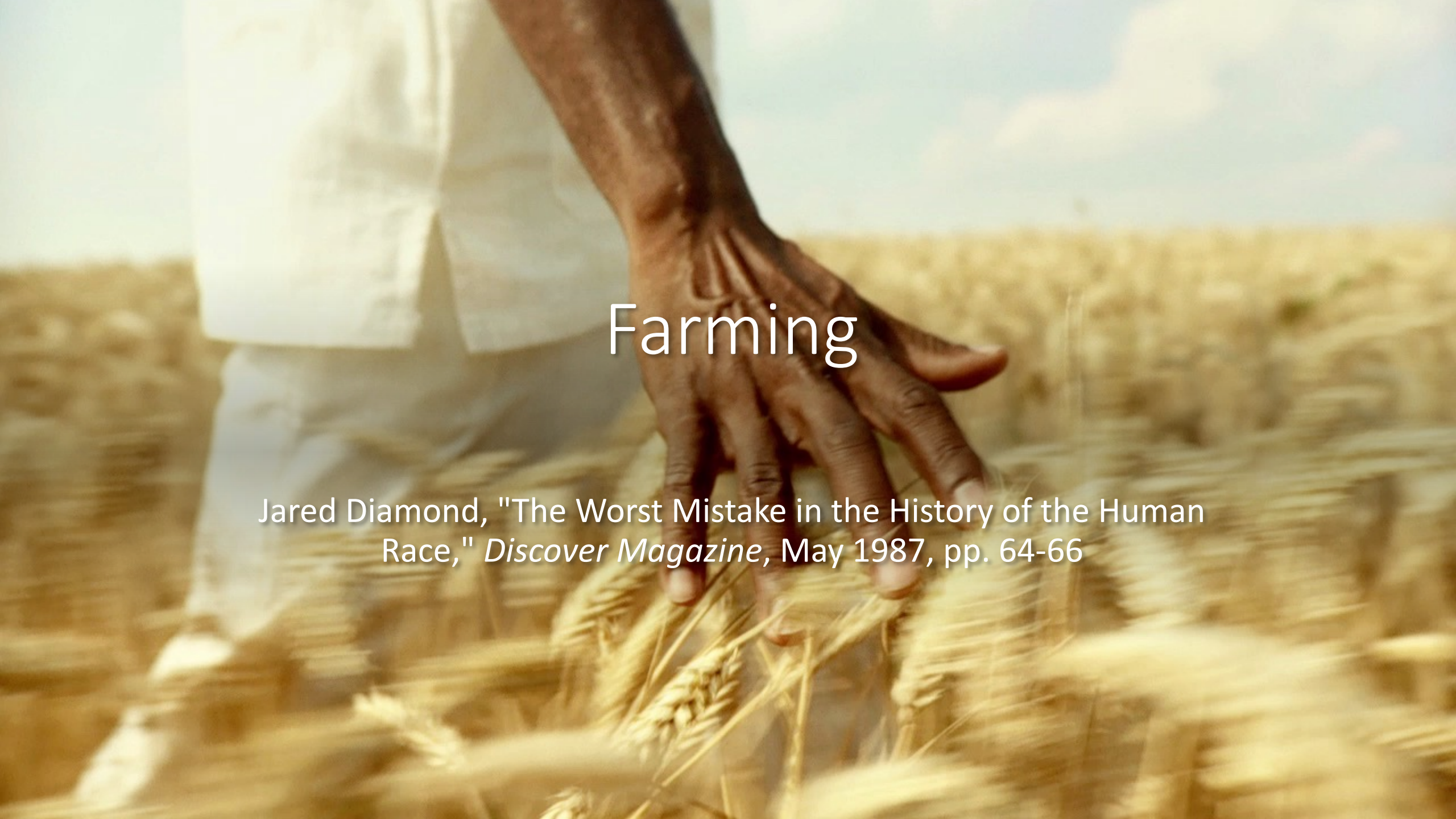


Farming

Jared Diamond, "The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race," *Discover Magazine*, May 1987, pp. 64-66

Diamond’s opening paragraph

To science we owe dramatic changes in our smug self-image. Astronomy taught us that our earth isn't the center of the universe but merely one of billions of heavenly bodies. From biology we learned that we weren't specially created by God but evolved along with millions of other species. Now archaeology is demolishing another sacred belief: that human history over the past million years has been a long tale of progress. In particular, 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.

His first points:

It appears obvious that our lives are better than foragers' lives or even life in medieval Europe.

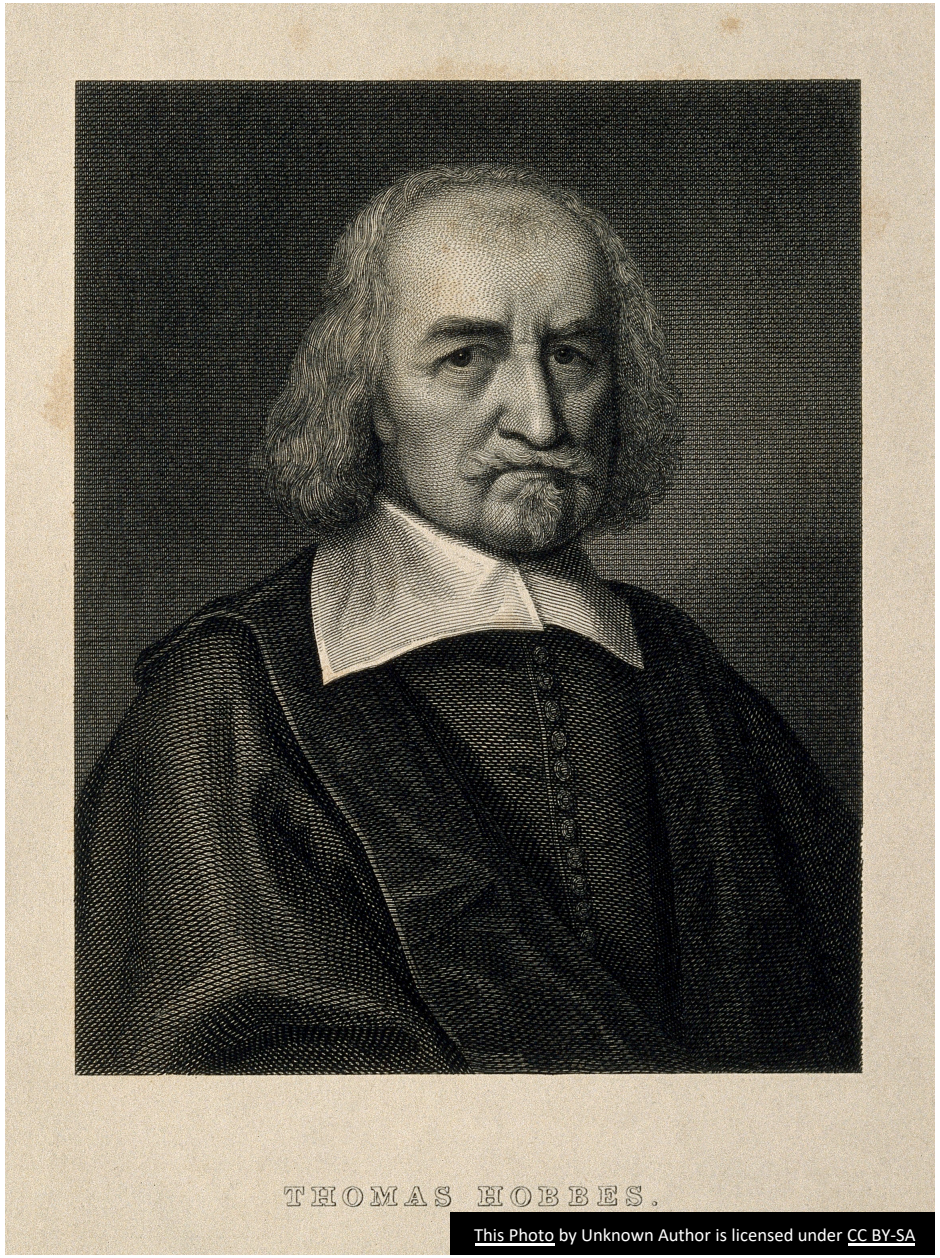
We have abundant food stuffs, longer lives and helpful technology.

Only a fool would want to return to the past.

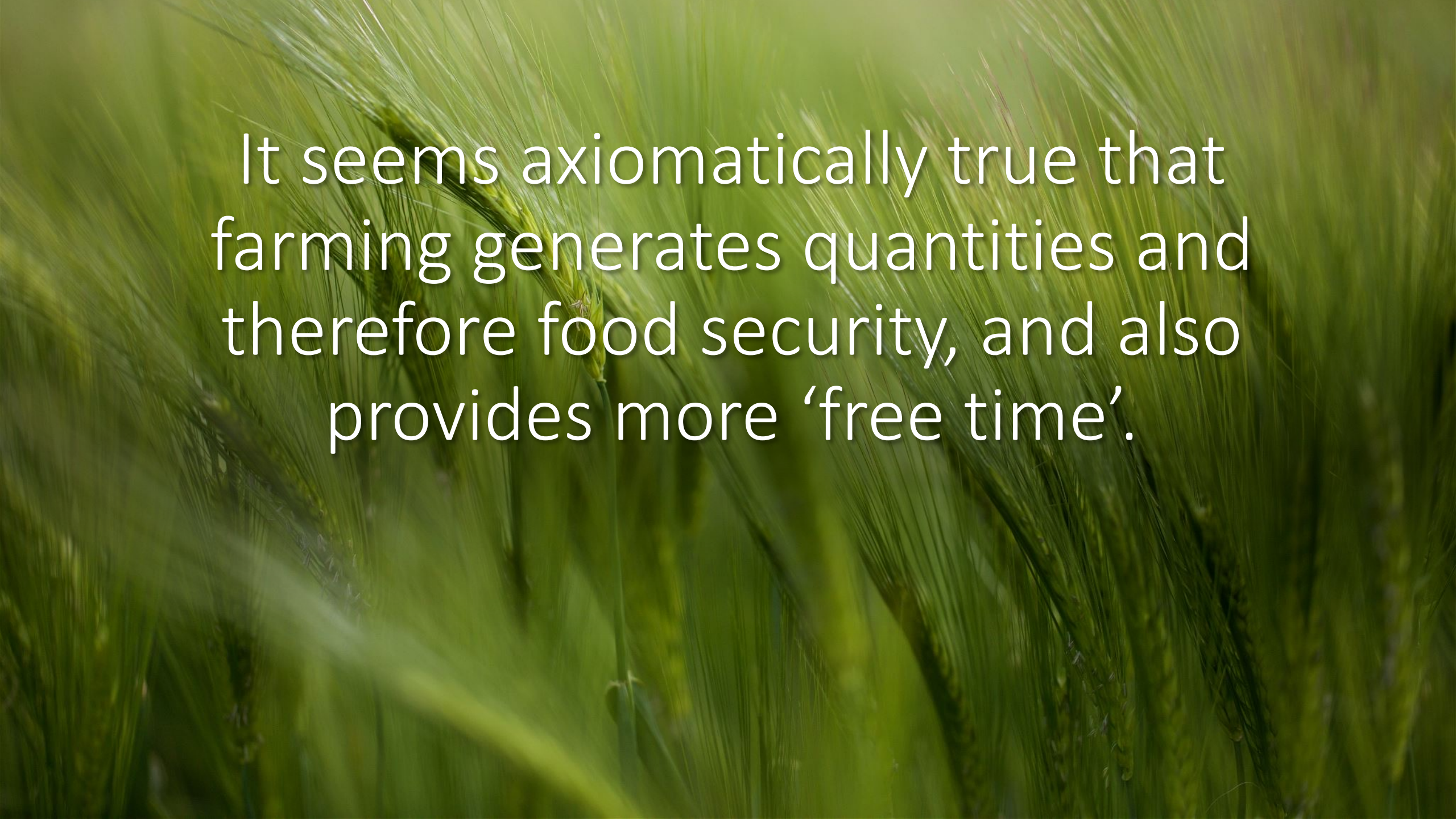
He continues by outlining historical changes and attitudes to foragers' lives.

Life was 'nasty, brutish and short' (Diamond, 1987 citing Hobbes' Leviathan).

' and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man [*sic*], solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short' (Hobbes, T. 1651. *Leviathan*, i. xiii. 9).



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It seems axiomatically true that farming generates quantities and therefore food security, and also provides more ‘free time’.

Quantity and (harvest) security

- ‘While farmers concentrate on high-carbohydrate crops like rice and potatoes, the mix of wild plants and animals in the diets of surviving hunter-gatherers provides more protein and a bettter balance of other nutrients. In one study, the Bushmen's average daily food intake …[was]…considerably greater than the recommended daily allowance. … It's almost inconceivable that Bushmen, who eat 75 or so wild plants, could die of starvation the way hundreds of thousands of Irish farmers and their families did during the potato famine of the 1840s.’



Health

- Skeletons provide evidence about sex, weight, height and age, and can show more including bone defects, malnutrition, anemia, tuberculosis, leprosy and more.

Differences between farmers' and foragers' skeletons

- 800 skeletons excavated around Illinois and Ohio show the changes that occurred when foragers transitioned to farming (A. D. 1150).
- Farmers showed '50% increase in enamel defects indicative of malnutrition, a fourfold increase in iron-deficiency anemia (evidenced by a bone condition called porotic hyperostosis), a threefold rise in bone lesions reflecting infectious disease in general, and an increase in degenerative conditions of the spine, probably reflecting a lot of hard physical labor.' (Diamond 1987)

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3 reasons why farming is bad for one’s health

One:

Lack of variety in a farmer's diet. Typically, a starchy, storable crop.



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Two: if that crop fails, starvation may follow



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Three: Overcrowding

- Settling in one spot (rather than mobilizing around an area) brought novel issues for social groups such as : parasites, infections, epidemics, excessive waste, tension over space and resources (water).



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Class division, inequity and gender inequality

Egalitarian foraging groups work hard to share and avoid social division

Farming cultures produce haves and have-nots for the first time

Agriculture puts different pressures on mothers than fathers



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Women continue to carry the heaviest workloads

Final paragraph from Diamond (1987)

- 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. Suppose that an archaeologist who had visited from outer space were trying to explain human history to his fellow spacelings. He might illustrate the results of his digs by a 24-hour clock on which one hour represents 100,000 years of real past time. If the history of the human race began at midnight, then we would now be almost at the end of our first day. We lived as hunter-gatherers for nearly the whole of that day, from midnight through dawn, noon, and sunset. Finally, at 11:54 p. m. we adopted agriculture. As our second midnight approaches, will the plight of famine-stricken peasants gradually spread to engulf us all? Or will we somehow achieve those seductive blessings that we imagine behind agriculture's glittering facade, and that have so far eluded us?