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Against The Grain: How Agriculture Has Hijacked Civilization



Synopsis

In this provocative, wide-ranging book, Richard Manning offers a dramatically revisionist view of recent human evolution, beginning with the vast increase in brain size that set us apart from our primate relatives and brought an accompanying increase in our need for nourishment. For 290,000 years, we managed to meet that need as hunter-gatherers, a state in which Manning believes we were at our most human: at our smartest, strongest, most sensually alive. But our reliance on food made a secure supply deeply attractive, and eventually we embarked upon the agricultural experiment that has been the history of our past 10,000 years. The evolutionary road is littered with failed experiments, however, and Manning suggests that agriculture as we have practiced it runs against both our grain and nature's. Drawing on the work of anthropologists, biologists, archaeologists, and philosophers, along with his own travels, he argues that not only our ecological ills-overpopulation, erosion, pollution-but our social and emotional malaise are rooted in the devil's bargain we made in our not-so-distant past. And he offers personal, achievable ways we might re-contour the path we have taken to resurrect what is most sustainable and sustaining in our own nature and the planet's.

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Customer Reviews

In many ways Manning has written a remarkable book. The basic thesis, very gently stated by the author, is that the advent of agriculture has caused the loss of what it means to be human by replacing our ancestral senses of the many flavors and varieties of nature with the dull security of industrial monoculture based overwhelmingly on just three crops. It has also heralded the

breakdown of social egalitarianism, led to vast numbers of malnourished poor worldwide, and is ultimately unsustainable on its current scale. In making his argument, Manning wanders through numerous disciplines: cultural anthropology, archaeology, evolutionary biology, climatology, cognitive science and ecology, even religion. He begins with an explanation of how agriculture developed and spread despite its apparent disadvantages to the hunter-gatherer lifestyle (worse nutrition, less leisure-time) and then develops these disadvantages more fully, surveying the prevalence of famine in agricultural societies throughout history and moving through the detrimental social and ecological effects of industrial agriculture such as how it enabled the feeding of high concentrations of cheap labor. 'Against The Grain' hits a weak spot in looking at modern agricultural corporations, in particular ADM. At this point, he draws less from his apparent strengths as a writer and person - his awareness and appreciation of nature and his solid understanding of the historical breadth and scope of agriculture's effects - and loses his effectiveness as his underlying anger is displayed.

Walk into to any supermarket and you probably feel very good about all of the choices you have. After all, the average supermarket carries over 25000 items these days. But if you are like most people, the vast majority of the items you will wind up purchasing are highly processed and contain precious little in the way of nutritional value. Did you know that nearly 2/3 of the calories the average American consumes come from just three crops--corn, wheat and potatoes? Author Richard Manning sure got my attention with this fascinating book "Against The Grain: How Agriculture Has Hijacked Civilization". Manning argues that for the vast majority of history human beings were "hunter-gatherers". That is, people would migrate to where the food was and partake of a vast assortment of foods, everything from fruits and vegetables, to nuts and legumes and fresh meat. This all began to change about 10000 years ago with the advent of agriculture. Over the centuries people came to rely on fewer and fewer crops for survival. Manning notes that the pattern was virtually identical all over the world. Soon human beings came to rely on just a handful of crops, all high in carbohydrates, for survival. In recent decades the rise of huge conglomerates like ADM (Archer Daniels Midland) has further exacerbated the problem. Corporate entities do not view crops as food. Rather, they view crops as commodities and it is for this reason that family farms have all but disappeared, people in poor nations go unfed despite massive crop surpluses and those in rich nations wind up eating a largely bland and less than nutritious diet. For those of us like myself who are poorly informed on these issues this book is certainly an eye-opener.

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