Is human inequality an inevitable by-product of living in larger and larger groups? Is ethnicity or race an inevitable result of living alongside alien groups of people? Some would argue that traits like hierarchy and division are ‘human nature.’ Are they, in fact, the products of the ways we live socially? If so, what are the implications for issues like social discord and justice?

In what ways did Neolithic humans modify their environment?

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In what ways, then, would our ancestors have to adapt to the changes that they themselves induced? That is, how had niche creation placed new demands on human ancestors?

Some evolutionary theorists have argued that saying humans are responsible for agriculture may be comparable to saying that petri dishes developed penicillin. Why might this statement make sense?

Is the transformation of humans into agricultural societies inevitable? Irreversible?
Tutorial Nine: Our Modern Ecological Niche

• How did the transition from nomadic hunters and gatherers to sedentary farmers differ in the Middle East and Americas?

• Arguably, the domestication of animals in Europe and Asia was more important to the success of Europe’s colonisation of the Americas than even the invention of the sailing ship or gunpowder. Why?

Questions for reflection:

• Why is the ‘pristine myth’ important to our understanding of the Americas, the fate of the Indians during European colonisation, and even environmental management?

• What are some of the unintended effects of agriculture and urbanization? Are they an inevitable consequence of these changes to human ways of life?

• What are the implications of this for our understanding of ‘human nature’?

Key terms:

Niche creation
Sedentary
Agriculture
Keystone species
Commensal
Domesticated animal
Resource management
Environmental alteration
Irrigation
Specialization
Surplus production
Social hierarchy
Anthropogenic
Solitary genius
Bands, chiefdoms and states
Zoonotic disease
Food production and infection
Domestication of animals
Pristine myth
Terraforming
Natuflans
‘Black earth’