

December 1, 1991 (Vol. 7, no. 7)

Dear Colleague:

I gave a talk to some two hundred freshmen honors students on the theme of freedom and constraint in geography: freedom to the extent that we have everywhere created "home" out of "space," "world" out of "environment"; constraint not only in the sense that we still have to submit to the forces of nature and of society but also in the sense that we are still largely ignorant of the consequences of our action. Rather than offer my listeners the obvious example of environmental degradation, I asked them to envisage the beauty of hierarchically ordered settlements--the webs of sparkling light that they can see if they fly over the Midwest at night--and realize that no one designed such an overall pattern. Human limitation is such that we fail to recognize not only the evil but also the happy consequences of what we do.

In giving the talk, I felt, more than ever, the indifference and resistance of my young listeners--so diverse in their passions and allegiances--to issues of general intellectual interest. To speak to them with any conviction, I have to assume that, despite chasms of age, experience, and cultural background, we share profound commonalities of body, mind, and spirit. I have to assume that, with good will and intelligence, we can overcome those accidents of life that have locked us into narrow and divisive realities. But contemporary society is increasingly bent on using all its massive engines of propaganda to persuade us otherwise. Since elementary school, these students have been told that people are different, that it is this difference that matters, that culture--far from being tinted spectacles that distort reality--is just about the only thing of value, to be uncritically embraced.

I can speak only with human beings--with the kernel in each of us which responds to a human (rather than merely cultural or gender) voice. How does one communicate with students who only know of "diversity", and for whom "common humanity" is an alien (and probably subversive) concept? It may be that I am just a creature of my time. After all, my boyhood overlapped with the founding of the United Nations--a brave new world with its starry-eyed belief in "Family of Man." Yet I am convinced that this generation, rather than my generation, is out of step with the long-range hope of humankind. I build my case on the worldview of an eight-year old African-American child who has just moved into Madison (see Isthmus Nov 15-21, 1991). He likes Madison! He likes school! He likes maths!--and doesn't give a hoot who (white or black) invented it. He is my kind of guy. I would love to have him in my class. All young children, you will notice, are figures out of the Enlightenment: their universalism should put our parochialism to shame.

Best wishes,

*J. Fu*