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October 15, 1985 (Letter 2)

Dear Colleague:

As a young person I was attracted to the idea of the "web of life"--and also, as a budding geomorphologist, to the idea of equilibrium--the "concept of the graded river" (Kesseli). There is something very appealing about a finely-tuned world, such that a note in one part will quickly reverberate through the entire system. John Playfair, in the 1820s, asked us to behold the wonderfully adjusted net of river channels. The accordance of the channels--the fact that they do not hang but run into each other smoothly--is elevated into a law which manifests the fine craftsmanship of God. In the American West, I was struck by the lack of accordance. Graded channels are rarely to be found and it seems wrong-headed to see this state of affairs as somehow an abnormality--a departure from an ideal of adjustment of the parts to each other and to the whole. Why can't we see this relative independence--this somewhat haphazard and ad hoc nature of reality--as the ideal? A world in which interdependence of the parts is "loose" allows greater possibilities for change and innovation. In such a world, disaster in one segment does not necessarily entail disaster in the rest. For the same reason, the result of a happy experiment in one part of the world will not diffuse automatically to the rest; it can, however, be distributed deliberately, through acts of the will.

Modern ideas in evolutionary biology also seem to pay increasing emphasis to "jumps" and "discontinuities"--to a lack of adjustment between components of nature--between, for instance, organism and environment. A recent statement of this view is as follows: "Fossil vertebrates tell us that adaptive improvement is controlled by two rare events--budding off of new species and replacement of parent by daughter species. - The combined result is an evolutionary rate so slow that no species may ever reach perfection. How should these facts change our perception of nature? The surgeon ought not to assume that the healthy human organ is the optimal piece of machinery that could be designed for its task. Environmentalists shouldn't assume that every habitat is a perfect and fragile balance of irreplaceable species... And where should evolutionary science go in the next decade? Away from facile mathematical models of ideal systems, and back to the comprehensive study of real species through geological time ." (Robert T. Bakker, "Evolution by Revolution," Science 85 , November).

. Isn't the possibility that all mammals are badly adjusted to their environment a source of comfort to us human beings? So we are not the only species saddled with a conservative, slow-changing body in a rapidly fluctuating or changing environment. But what about our built environment? Isn't it changing at a bewildering rate--one that is far greater than any in nature? Yes, but the changes are in the direction of greater stability! That's the paradox. Cities may be unrecognizably different every generation. In the meantime, hot-and-cold running water becomes more dependable and insurance policies make the citizen's life more predictable. (P.S. One of the reasons for the great fear of fire in the past was that it totally wiped out one's hard-earned worldly goods, with no hope for compensation. See Alan

Macfarlane, "The Family Life of Ralph Josselin: A Seventeenth Century Clergyman", Cambridge University Press, 1970).

Security and stability, it goes without saying, are the privileges of the well-to-do middle class in affluent Western societies. Without dependable water-closets, a dependable thermostat controlling the temperature of one's room, people live in an environment that seems bewilderingly harsh, totally unpredictable and arbitrary. In despair they retreat to a simplified, fundamentalist way of life, or to the relief of conflagration.

Have you read Lawrence Stone's Haskins lecture? It appears in the ACLS Newsletter for Winter-Spring, 1985. Stone is famed for his pioneering efforts in quantitative history. In this lecture, he surveys the people and ideas that have influenced him. He greatly admires the Annales school, as do we geographers. However, Stone is also critical of the school. For instance, he cannot accept the Annales historians's "three-tiered model of causal factors in history, rising from the economic and demographic base through the middle layer of the social structure to the derivative super-structure of ideology, religion, political beliefs, and mentalité." Sounds familiar doesn't it? The trouble with the wedding-cake mode of analysis is that it presupposes the predominance of material factors over cultural ones, and it also "precludes the possibility, so well brought out by Max Weber, that the three levels are in a constant state of dynamic interaction, rather than in a hierarchy of dominance and dependence." Furthermore, the search for materialist explanation and quantifiable data leads, inevitably, to a certain blindness. We know this to be true in idealist interpretations of reality. Well, it is equally true of materialist interpretations. An example is Fernand Braudel's lengthy and brilliant "The Mediterranean in the Time of Philip II." In this ambitiously comprehensive work, the author (as Stone points out) barely mentions religion, either Christianity or Islam.

Magasin (French) = storehouse of goods  
Magazine = storehouse of knowledge

Both have become popular in the early part of the 19th century--the peak of Bourgeois achievement. Can you have the one without the other? The modern university has been characterized as a supermarket of knowledge. Students shop down its amply stocked aisles, picking up courses with the help of a catalog. They are encouraged to create their own mix, just as they do at the Salad Bar. The problem with education--and, I might add, the problem with modern life--is that few of us are confident of what to use for salad dressing: it is the dressing that gives integrity and character to the entire mix. Where in higher education and in life can we find the magic dressing? For answer, we will just have to wait for Bob's third book.

Best wishes,

*J. Z.*