

v.1
January 20, 1986 (letter 8)

Dear Colleague:

In the days when I taught Introduction to Human Geography, I would sooner or later have to say something about Central-place theory. I usually introduce the topic by asking students to think of themselves as flying in a airplane at night at an elevation of 30,000 feet above the Midwest. The landscape below them is swathed in total darkness except for the brilliant cobweb-like arrangement of towns. I remind them of the beauty of this scene and say one reason for the beauty is its display of evident order: you see a large city and beyond it is a ring of smaller cities, and beyond those is a spattering of lights, and thence total darkness until you come to the next patterned, hierarchical order. I say, well, at least in the Midwest Americans have been able to design and then build a functional and rational landscape. Now, the question is, who designed it? Some super planning agency of the federal government? Of course, by this time every student in class realizes--with perhaps a jolt--that no one, no single organizing intellect or agency designed it, and yet it is there. The students look a bit puzzled and wonder how I am going to account for this remarkable phenomenon. That is when I present the Central-place theory with a flourish, no doubt making claims for it that Martin will tell me are inadmissible. In the meantime, students think that geography is a science of marvellous explanatory power!

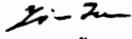
Actually, the real reason why I have told you the above story is this. I have wondered from time to time whether my kind of intelligence is primitive or modern. Reluctantly I conclude that it is primitive. A characteristic of the primitive mind is its tendency to assign intelligence to whatever it sees, and especially if what it sees displays evident order. Also a sign of primitivity--though perhaps less so--is to believe that an object, not itself intelligent, is nonetheless the work of an intelligence. The ancient Greeks assigned intelligence to the stars, and even Copernicus spoke of the sun as though it could see. And even in the so-called Age of Enlightenment, people found evidences of mind everywhere: in the shape of a symmetrical crystal, or in the human ear--obviously designed to hear God's commandments. By the late nineteenth century, disillusionment had set in in earnest and it has gone from bad to worse ever since. One object after another was found to be dumb. In the course of time, even human works are believed to be the result of the operation of mindless, impersonal laws. By human works I think of not only the market system and the systems of cities, but even something as compact and small as an individual building. No single mind--no single organizing intelligence--knows how to put up a highrise in all its detail and yet there it stands, more or less functioning. The steady removal of the attribution of intelligence to things has by now reached human beings themselves. People are programmed to feel, think, and act by the impersonal, mindless laws of nature and society: they cannot really think for themselves, they have no active initiating power.

Yet, it must take intelligence of a high order to recognize the nonexistence of intelligence everywhere. Some one must be intelligent. It cannot be you because--much as I like you--you are

necessarily a part of an explainable external reality; it can therefore only be me!

Here is one more evidence of nonintelligence. Do you know that a bottle of "1787 Lafitte Th. J" has recently been sold at Christie's for the record price of \$150,000? That is not what surprises me. What does knock me over is the news that when the auctioneer brought the gavel down, almost instantly the sales room resounded with applause. What were those monkeys applauding?

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to be "E. J. ...", located below the text "Best wishes,".