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Dear Colleague:

Welcome back from your summer vacation! Science Hall is a bit weird this summer and you are wise to have kept away: it is most of the time a noisy tomb--the noise of a factory combined with the sad silence of abandoned playgrounds. In the past I have enjoyed summers. The hassle is over, people are relaxed and there is time for all to engage in gentle reflections on geography and life over coffee on the terrace. But I now see that this is a personal fantasy. In the future the tomblike silence will remain although at least I can hope that the chain-saws and pneumatic drills will move elsewhere.

I have been hearing much about sibling fights from colleagues with young children this summer. The fights occur at home but even more so on a long trip across the country, which makes me think that these trips must be truly heroic and are carried through year after year in the pioneering spirit of the frontier past. I have also wondered whether I fought with my two brothers, both only a year apart from me in age, when we were children. The answer is no. The reasons why are interesting from a sociological point of view. First reason is class structure. (Now I hope my Marxian readers will perk up!) In the traditional Chinese society, a wide social gap separates siblings of different age. I call my older brother respectfully "older brother," but he calls me (or rather he has the right to call me) by my pet name. If I tease him he cannot fight back, no more will his lordship drop his gauntlet to challenge a cheeky butler. So class structure makes for peace. The second reason is equally "classical." In Australia, the three of us--thin and small through undernourishment in wartime China-- had to band together to defend ourselves against the merciless taunting of beefy Australian schoolboys. So we were in a typical "us vs. them" situation which of course made for group solidarity. As adolescents in England, again we did not fight, but this time the reason was geographical separation: we went to different schools.

I am never quite sure whether I feel pleased or annoyed when my own behavior or the personal relationships in my life can be understood or explained in accordance with some social-scientific schema. To be sure I am pleased to be a part of the race, to have the peaceful anonymity of being merely a textbook example; on the other hand, I know that this is in fact a kind of death wish that one ought to fight against. At least from time to time, one ought to be glad to be an unexplained residual. This ornery posture is more than an egoistical desire to be unique. At stake is the important psychological question: how can one have respect for others--how can one even see them--if they all toe the regression line?

Best wishes,

