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Dear Colleague:

This is an extra "in-house" issue for local consumption stimulated by the news that Columbia University has closed its geography department. Closing an academic unit occurs from time to time, for one reason or another, but the closing of geography at Columbia is especially ironic because I remember that in the 'fifties, when Jacque Barzun was Provost of Columbia, he argued in favor of geography against the rise of area studies: he felt at the time that geography had respectable academic roots whereas areas studies was likely to respond to passing political crises and fads. Alas, despite Barzun, it is geography that is out in the cold, not area studies.

Two great opportunities came to geography in the last three decades, but they have both turned into threats to our institutional survival. One is the enormous interest in the environment and the other is the popularity of area studies in the universities. Geography has always been interested in people-environment. One needs only point to the international symposium (1955), sponsored by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, that produced the monumental Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth. Geographers were a dominant voice in that symposium and, of course, Carl Sauer was the inspiration behind the entire enterprise. Note that Sauer's name comes first in the list of chairmen, the other two being the distinguished scholars Marston Bates and Lewis Mumford. Geographers were intellectual leaders in a group that also included biologists, philosophers, anthropologists, and historians. Borchert tells me that another international symposium is being planned, sponsored by the science academies of different nations, but in this symposium the voice of geographers will be muted indeed.

What happened? Are we to blame? It is cold comfort to know that to a large degree, we are not; and this means that there is not a great deal we can do to rectify the situation. The obvious answer to "what happened?" is that we are swamped by the demand: a small group of geographers cannot possibly cope with the vast interest. Another answer is that the almost fanatical interest in environment arose at the same time as the theoretical-quantitative revolution in geography. Some of our most talented people were siphoned off to other directions. I do not say this with regret; on the contrary, geography is greatly strengthened by its forays into mathematical modelling, and geographical theorists have won us respect from such empirical disciplines as settlement archaeology and history. But we pay for this foray. An interesting example is John Hudson's book Plains Country Towns, which has won the J.B. Jackson prize for the best book on the American landscape. It is a fine work of scholarship, and it presents spatial insights that are inaccessible to scholars in other disciplines. Jackson himself likes the book, but he asks me plaintively over the 'phone, "How is it possible for a book on the Great Plains, written by a geographer, to ignore the overwhelming presence of nature in that part of the world?" How indeed? Not through deliberate slight or capriciousness, I say, but from the economy of attention: as an individual we have only a certain amount

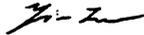
of energy. Attend to one thing and other things equally important move out of focus, and what is true of the individual geographer is true also of our collective self.

There are a number of other reasons why geographers are threatened by the rise of Environmental Studies. One is that many of the questions that the public is interested in, and hence willing to pay for, are of a narrowly technical nature. Geographers are not toxicologists. Although we may have highly developed technical skills, it goes against the grain for us to be narrow specialists. Besides technical questions, the public is also interested in political questions, in finding back-up for environmental beliefs which, in order to be translated into policies, must seem scientific. Geographers, as scholar-scientists, hesitate to enter this swampy arena, although as citizens they may want to do so. Now, unfortunately for geographers, money lies in technology and in policy, not in the geographers' cool, in-depth concerns with people-environment relationship, whether a crisis exists there or not. Or rather, to put it more precisely, the scholar-geographer takes the position that since utopia or Eden nowhere exists, wherever you find human beings you find tensions, problems, tragedies, "crises" (if you like) and it can be pretty arbitrary (i.e., political) which particular problem you choose to call crisis. Now this kind of sophistication, which we geographers have always had, does not sit well with the public and least of all with politicians.

A third reason for the rise of Environmental Studies is the rise of big government. Now, big government has been around a long time. To work, it must have information. A primary business of all governments is inventory. Who helps with the inventory? Why, in the past geographers. We gathered information for governments from all over the world, everything from population to coconut production. Remember that many geographical societies, including the American Geographical Society, were once known as Geographical and Statistical Societies. In our salad days, we were besotted with information. Even when I was an undergraduate the most prestigious undertaking by a geographer was Dudley Stamp's Land Utilization Survey of Great Britain. Predictably, Stamp was knighted by the British government for his service. Stamp grew ambitious and wanted to map the land use of the entire world. Governments would have been willing to spend money for this kind of exercise. Of course, mapping as Stamp saw it, requiring armies of people (geographers!), was rendered obsolete by techniques of remote sensing. But the need for inventory remains, and governments continue more than willing to spend money on it. Why don't we geographers jump in and get a slice of the pie? The answer is the intellectual progress of the discipline--alas. Since Stamp's day we have grown a great deal more sophisticated: few geographers, if any, would want to engage in developing Geographic Information Systems as such, unless the information thus gained would resolve conceptual problems that they have more or less independently raised. Geographers are no longer in the business of gathering information for itself in the vague feeling that it will eventually be useful, no matter how fancy the techniques of inventory. We have increasingly become intellectuals, at home in a College of intellectuals, and I guess we must expect to eat the potato-and-soup fare that society normally consigns to its brainy children.

The position of geography in the universities is also somewhat threatened by the rise of Area Studies programs. Some of the arguments I have used for Environmental Studies would also apply to Area Studies: for instance, the sparsity of talents for foreign areas when so many young geographers in the 'sixties were drawn into the hierarchy of central-place theory. But there are distinct differences. Geography can flourish side by side with strong Area Studies programs. Madison itself is an excellent example. Why here and not elsewhere--e.g., Michigan and Columbia? Would a colleague with regional expertise care to respond? Maybe we can have a discussion over lunch?

Best wishes,

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