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Dear Colleague:

Geography is tacit knowledge. History, by contrast, is overt knowledge. This difference explains, in large part, the greater popularity of history in schools and colleges. Let me elaborate a little. Geographical knowledge--e.g., where breeding grounds and water-holes are--is essential to the survival of all animals, including humans. But with all animals, excepting only the humans, this knowledge remains tacit; it is not consciously articulated and interpreted. Even with humans, only a small number feel the need for conscious articulation and interpretation--and they are the geographers. History, by contrast, is the deliberate attempt to break out of the tacit realm, which is also the realm of routine life, by focusing on dramatic events that seem--or are made to seem--"extra"ordinary.

Geography is an animal-and-human universal; history, by contrast, is only a human universal, for only humans tell each other stories, and the story is a primitive type of history. Bored with routine and the local geography I know so well because it is necessary to my daily survival, I buttonhole someone and say, "Hi, you know what happened to me on my way to school...?" And history--i.e., traditional national or political history--is basically this kind of dramatic story-telling, and no wonder every one is interested. "Hi, you know what Columbus did when he got to America...?" The explanatory schema in storytelling and in the traditional historical narrative is full of illogical leaps and gaps, but that fact fazes no one; indeed, the gaps can make the story or history seem all the more mysterious and gripping. "When King Charles's head started to roll, then ..." What a lot of causal factors fall through that "then"! But no one really minds. After all, whereas getting your tacit geography wrong may kill you, getting your consciously-elaborated story or history wrong may well win you applause.

Modern history has been strongly influenced by geography. It is no longer storytelling, full of exciting personalities and events. It focuses more and more on "daily life"--the routines of making a living--and is becoming rather dry and in danger of losing its popularity. Geography, on its part, is jazzing up its approach by employing the dynamic concepts of struggle, confrontation, and conflict and by arguing that even material places (buildings) can have "personality" and power.

Best wishes,

