

November 1, 1991 (Vol. 7, no. 5)

Dear Colleague:

Increasingly, scientists believe that the human brain evolved in tandem with the intellectual challenge of coping with dependent children rather than, as previously thought, with the manufacture of tools. Today, it is still true that interpreting social relations, rather than understanding physical reality, engages the bulk of the intellectual energy of chimpanzees as well as of human beings. Only in the lab do chimpanzees show any interest in symbols and their power. Only a few men and women in any human society take time to wonder, impersonally and abstractly, how nature and society work.

Western civilization is unique in having moved significantly to a different apportionment in the use of mental energy. No longer forced to figure out how to please one's maternal great uncle, or what kind of gift to send to a cousin twice removed, or how to threaten someone without the actual use of violence, more and more Westerners, since the seventeenth century, have leftover mental voltage to engage in scientific work. The result is a vast gain in knowledge of the external world and, concomitantly, a significant loss in kinship terminology and taxonomy. The Chef de Protocol at the State Department (for instance) is a crude amateur compared with any village headman, when it comes to recognizing the finer shades of social power and status.

In the late twentieth century, the West is at last forced to rejoin the rest of the world. In the West, too, more and more mental voltage is now apportioned to meeting sociopolitical demands than to those of abstract understanding. Politics threatens to invade all realms of life in part because it is more accessible and glamorous and in part because it is become a necessary condition for doing any science at all. Students, for example, are at ease in the mental-psychological challenges of practical politics. They much prefer arguing with the Chancellor, forcing her to change the University curriculum to their taste, than reading the classics of politics in the quiet of the library and risk having to change their own viewpoint. As for those who still do science, their energies are increasingly consumed in grantsmanship, in begging people to write letters of support, and in getting along with more and more co-workers. In the Soviet Union, things were so bad that scientists must wine-and-dine the Colonels, who had power over supplies, before they could get a basic instrument, such as an oscilloscope (See The New Republic, Oct. 28, 1991).

Best wishes,

*Z. Fu*