

May 1, 1994 (Vol. 9, no. 17)

Dear Colleague:

I had assumed that a difference between the Humanities and the Sciences is that the former is somewhat conservative and traditional and that the latter is radical and revolutionary. A student of the Humanities loves to browse among old journals, whereas a student of the Sciences discards any issue that is more than five years old.

I am beginning to question this folk wisdom, based on my experience in Science Hall. As one of the best geography departments in the world, we get more than our share of distinguished visitors. When a human geographer of my generation comes for a visit, we faculty may have to prepare our students to welcome him. His name may be on everyone's lip in the '60s and '70s, but today he is barely known. Certain areas of human geography are as faddish as the couturier's art, with the result that students tend to avoid literature that is more than fifteen years old. By contrast, students in physical geography show more knowledge of and respect for the ancestors of their subdiscipline. My colleagues in physical geography do not have to prepare their students when a "grey" eminence in their field comes to town.

What has happened? Well, human geography has been subjected to the full blast of deconstruction. Its House of Intellect is in ruins or covered with graffiti. By contrast, the House that physical geographers have built is still more or less intact. Certain structures, believed to be fundamental in an earlier time, have to be taken out--e.g., the principle of uniformitarianism, the concept of grade or equilibrium--but, by and large, the House is recognizably the same as it was ten, twenty, or even thirty years ago. A reason for the stability of physical geography is that its "rhetoric"--that is, its method of presenting evidence and arguing from it--has not much changed. More important is the very concept of a House. Whereas physical geographers take pride in it, young human geographers regard the very idea of a House (much less a skyscraper) as hegemonic or totalizing. They prefer to put up Pizza Huts, forgetting that such modest-looking buildings are franchises from UCLA and Paris.

I suspect that the above is true not only of geography but of the larger intellectual world. If you want a reputation that lasts beyond the next decade, be a scientist rather than a humanist. For who among you (I am addressing younger readers) have heard of--much less respect--Margaret Mead, Albert Camus, or Albert Schweitzer? By contrast, not only Einstein, but Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg are still household names.

Best wishes,

