

Genetics and geography

I thought we were going to Cape Cod," Nancy told me, "until we arrived in Capetown. I'm not very good about geography." Neither, I ruefully observe, are most other women.

There was, mind you, an exception. An elderly British academic/cum spy whom I met poking about in southern Africa. Map in hand, she tried hard to pry out of me the troop dispositions of General Savimbi's bush army along the Angola-Namibia border.

Namibia? Is that near Libya?

Men, too, get their places mixed up. Friends of mine in Haiti nearly always got their mail six months late because it was misdirected to Tahiti by dolts in the U.S. post office.

But women have a special problem with geography. There is some part of the female mind that has an awful lot of trouble with math, mechanical things, geometry and locations, or the old square peg in the round hole syndrome. Psychologists use the mumbo-jumbo term "spatial relationship differential" to describe this condition.

Any man who has ever handed over a road map to a female travelling companion and said, "Quick, we're coming to the turnoff, which is the best route?" will instantly understand what I am saying. At such a moment, most women get terribly flustered, try to read the map upside down, then grow nervous, upset and finally sullen.

Mention Ghana or Burma and women's eyes glaze over. Talk about events overseas and most females grow fidgety and restless, as if you were speaking in tongues. "Tell me about something really important," they will say, usually meaning real estate. For too many ladies, the outside world is the place you go to get a decent tan or a pair of Maude Frizon shoes.

Even one of the smartest and best-informed women in this country used to get her countries

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mixed up when we discussed foreign affairs. "Over there somewhere" is how she dealt with confusion between Mali and Mauritania or Yemen and Oman. Yet you could plunk her down blindfolded in the middle of Paris and she could unerringly find her way from Chloe to Lanvin to Montana to Balenciaga. Which proves, I guess, that women just don't have time for non-essential fripperies.

When, for example, did you last overhear two ladies at lunch saying, "Joyce, do you think Brazil will be able to reschedule its foreign debt?" or, perhaps, "Do you think the reformers in China are in trouble?"

Recently, I was chatting with a mature nymph from California—the land where if it hasn't appeared on TV it doesn't exist—and the subject of Kuwait somehow came up. "Kuwait," she said. "Is that in the Philippines?"

I mentioned this howler to a male friend. "Women," he patiently rebuked me, "aren't supposed to know about things like that." Well, yes and no.

It's true that women tend to concentrate on things that touch their lives directly. They personalize. Loved ones, jobs, family, friends are the woman's geography. Besides, women are so constantly busy fussing over personal maintenance, what to wear, split ends, exercise class or what to do about that broken strap that they don't have as much time as men to muse over the state of the world.

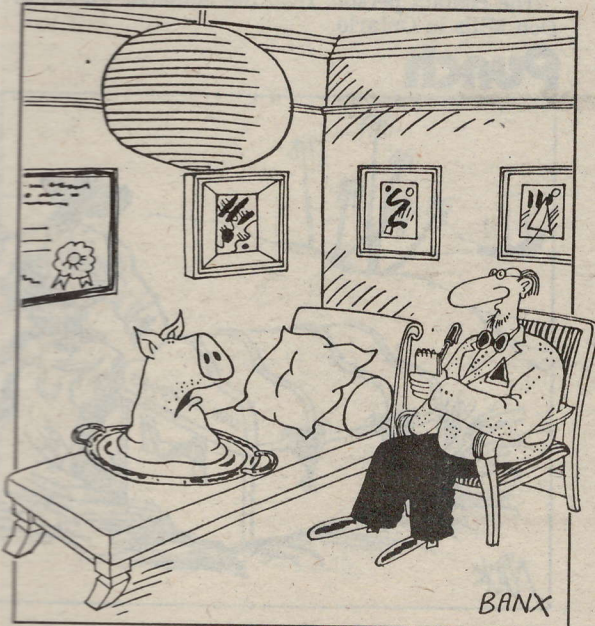
How can you be an abstract thinker when you have to get up at 5:30 to do your hair before work?

But it's also equally true that women today are demanding a say in the affairs of the world. Now that women have elbowed their way into politics and business what they know or don't know about the rest of the world is becoming very important. Women's groups and female politicians are increasingly vocal about such key issues as defence, Star Wars, Central America, human rights, trade policy and military spending.

So it matters a great deal that women who don't know a MiG from a megaton or Nicaragua from Nigeria are insisting that they influence decisions on such vital matters. Understanding world affairs demands a firm grounding in history, geography and military science—all subjects that most women hate, the splendid Maggie Thatcher excepted.

The moral of this story is: Ladies, if you want your voices to be heard in the corridors of power, throw down *Cosmo*, cast aside your Danielle Steeles, forget about self-improvement books. Get out the old atlas. To help you remember, make word associations... Fiji sounds like Fendi; Jordan sounds like Charles Jourdan.

Punch



"I keep thinking I'm John the Baptist."