

## VIEWPOINT

### Some Afterthoughts on the Conference

---

John Fraser Hart  
University of Minnesota \*

This conference on harmony and conflict in rural and ex-urban space has been a rich and rewarding educational experience for me, because for the past three decades or more I have been extremely parochial. I have invested virtually all of my energies in trying to understand the complexities of rural areas in the United States, and I have paid far too little attention to other parts of the world.

As I have listened to colleagues from other countries I have been impressed by how similar we all are. We live in a world that has outgrown its traditional structures of settlement and of administration, and we are trying to figure out how to adapt these outmoded structures to the rapidly changing needs of contemporary society. We are trying to decide what can be rescued, what can be recycled and rehabilitated, and what is so obsolete that it must be jettisoned and replaced.

#### RURAL CHANGE IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Most of us see pressures for change as being nationally and culturally specific, as indeed they are, but for me, at least, this conference has highlighted their similarities.

Many of the pressures with which we are trying to cope can properly be described as variations upon a theme. They are products of the same basic processes, as mediated by highly variable and diverse national policies and ideologies.

We have been talking about similar developments and similar pressures, although, of course, the pace of development has been more rapid in some countries than in others. Each country has a rich opportunity for learning from the experiences of others, from their failures, as well as from their successes, but we

---

\* Department of Geography, University of Minnesota, MN 55455, USA.

must examine and use the experience of other countries with great care and great sensitivity.

We should borrow good ideas wherever we can find them, but we cannot assume that any idea, no matter how good and how successful in one particular context, can be universally applicable and equally successful in every context. We must be attuned to differences as well as to similarities, and we must understand our own society and our own polity well enough to have a shrewd idea about what innovations might be successful.

I believe that most pressures for change stem from the basic inherent similarity of the human animal, wherever it happens to reside. Most of us behave in much the same way when we are subjected to the same set of stimuli, and I submit that the basic stimulus that has produced most of the pressures we are trying to understand, and with which are trying to cope, is the replacement of the horse by the internal combustion engine.

The tractor (and its permutations, such as the self-propelled combine) has replaced the horse. It has drastically reduced the need for farm labor, thus freeing or forcing hordes of farm youths to migrate to the city. It has greatly increased the minimal size of a viable farm, and larger farms require more highly skilled professional management. Larger farm size also seems to induce greater specialization, which requires greater skill and greater sensitivity in seeking and serving ever larger markets.

The motor truck and now the jet airplane have replaced the horse and the farm wagon, and they have globalized the market for farm products. Farmers in Iowa look nervously at Brazil before they decide whether to plant soybeans. Farmers in Florida and in California fret that a free trade agreement with Mexico will put them out of the tomato business. On St. Valentine's Day a florist in Minneapolis sells fresh flowers flown in from Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador, Holland, and Thailand.

Each of us has our own similar anecdotal evidence of globalization, but each of us tends to think of our own knowledge and experience as unique, and many of us fail to realize the ubiquity of globalization. Start watching for it, and I think you will be as surprised as I was by the ease with which you can find examples.

The automobile has replaced the horse and buggy, and it has sounded the death knell of many small agricultural service centers. The former retail function of small central places has shifted up the urban hierarchy to larger centers, and the small towns that survive have had to seek new *raisons d'être*. Quite a few have managed to find new niches as minor cogs in the larger system of manufacturing centers.

The automobile has transformed the metropolis. Most people, once they acquire cars, start to behave in the very fashion for which they have long ridiculed Americans. They are willing to commute distances that I personally consider unconscionable, although each day I, myself, think nothing of commuting a distance that my grandfather would have deemed unconscionable.

The personal mobility associated with the automobile and the airplane have also increased pressure from the metropolis on land for recreation, for second homes, and for retirement, but remember that tourism often destroys tourism. The ever greater numbers of city people who invade the countryside can debase the very amenities they seek to enjoy, but their increased exposure to the countryside can also intensify their concern for protecting and preserving it. The very concept of sustainability, which has become one of the popular catchwords of the Greens Movement, in some ways is a rejection of modern metropolitan society, an attempt to turn back the clock to an earlier age.

The expanding metropolis has completely blurred the traditional distinction between urban and rural, and the idea of a neat urban/rural dichotomy has become a trivial, outmoded, horse-and-buggy concept in a globalized economy and society.

The concept of rurality has many dimensions, and once upon a time these dimensions were tightly intercorrelated, but no more. Once you could use any trait to identify the entire bundle, but now the bundle of traits has disintegrated, and the concept of rurality has lost the analytical power it once held.

The concept of rurality still is extremely useful, however, because vernacular speech needs fuzzy words such as 'rural' or 'place' or 'landscape', words that we all think we understand, but words that would lose their usefulness if we defined them precisely for analytical purposes. We can all identify the ends of the rural/urban continuum, but trying to define the dividing line between rural and urban is a fruitless and unproductive exercise.

The greatest pressure on the land resources of rural areas, however they may be defined, is at the urban fringe, the fuzzy zone where rural and urban interface. Your view of the urban fringe depends on your perspective, whether you look at it from the city or from the countryside. The developer sees a potential shopping center or a splendid new housing development where the farmer sees a fine stand of corn or a thriving grove of citrus trees, and of course both are right. That is the problem.

Differing perspectives inevitably lead to conflicting claims for the use of the land, and each polity has had to evolve its own distinctive institutional framework, based on its own particular blend of ideology, ideals, and values, for adjudicating such claims, for allocating the precious land resource to those who have equally legitimate claims to its use.

This institutional framework is extremely important for the resolution of disputes about land use in a particular country, but outside that country it may be little more than a curiosity. Outsiders have little interest in unique traditions and institutions (because they are hard to change, almost impossible to transfer, and so we must live with what we have inherited), but we all need to understand the process of competition for land and its conversion to alternative uses. The institutions are unique, but the ongoing processes of competition and conversion seem to be universal.

What administrative structure can best provide the services necessary for the contemporary patterns of settlement that result from these processes, patterns that have become so amorphous because the traditional distinctions between urban and rural have become so hopelessly blurred? We cannot think clearly about what we should be doing and where we should be going until we understand where we are and how we got here.

Enlightened decision-making must be based on a clear understanding of contemporary society and the processes that are influencing it, not on sentiment, no matter how well-intentioned. Our understanding definitely will be enhanced by careful analysis and comparison of the various manifestations of a process that is similar in most other parts of the world.

Some people argue that understanding should lead to action. They believe that application is implicit in any academic analysis, that we should use our understanding to make good predictions, and that we should act on our predictions. I am not so sure. I am reminded of the dictum that those who live by the crystal ball must learn to eat broken glass. I am content to make the effort to understand, and I am willing to leave prediction and the politics of implementation to those who are so inclined. I do believe, however, that scholars have a major obligation to help activists develop a clear understanding of the processes they are trying to influence.

It seems to me that most successful attempts to serve the needs of contemporary society have been based on developing greater cooperation between existing units of government, and on replacing horse-and-buggy-sized units with larger automobile-sized units. These units must learn to cooperate instead of competing with each other. A group of small units, for example, can cooperate to support service establishments that none of them alone could support, and each unit can be allocated its fair share of the establishments that serve the entire group.

Perhaps the simplest solution to many of our problems would be to outlaw the private automobile. That kind of thinking actually seems to underlie some, perhaps many, of the 'solutions' that have been proposed by various people, but I doubt that it would have widespread popular appeal. The automobile is a fact of modern life, whether we like it or not. It has created many of the problems we are now trying to solve, but we must accept it and learn to cope with it and its consequences, because we cannot abolish it. And I repeat my belief that these consequences have been remarkably similar wherever they have had the chance to develop, so all of us have much to learn from sharing our common experiences.

## THE MODERN METROPOLITAN FRONTIER

The rural/urban fringe is the raw frontier of modern metropolitan society. It is changing feverishly, virtually overnight. It is rowdy and rambunctious. Its raw vigor offends the sensibilities of effete folk from older, settled, more civilized

areas, but it is entirely too busy with its own affairs even to know about, much less to care about, their disapproval.

As the saying goes, it cries all the way to the bank. The frontier is a place where fortunes are made and lost. It has an irresistible lure for those risk-takers who are willing to take a chance on making a fortune. When we are in foul mood, we castigate these risk-takers, these gamblers, as speculators or developers, but in our kindlier moments we are forced to admit that they actually are entrepreneurs, and society would be much the poorer without them.

The rowdy and rambunctious frontier was not exactly lawless, but it was largely oblivious to the traditional legal niceties that moderated life in older and more settled society. The frontier of settlement was ruled by raw power, the power of the sword, the power of the pistol. The new metropolitan frontier also is ruled by raw power, but by the power of the purse—the almighty dollar, the pound, the yen, the franc, the Deutschmark, the shekel.

The developer, the entrepreneur, the person prepared to put large amounts of money at risk, can ride roughshod over the traditional political and legal institutions of rural society, which are mesmerized, overwhelmed, paralyzed by the sudden avalanche of people and money.

The modern metropolitan frontier is the area where some of the most intensive agricultural uses of land are being converted into some of the less intensive urban uses. This urban encroachment on agricultural land, the conversion of agricultural land to nonagricultural uses, is inevitable. It is the result of natural economic processes, and trying to prevent or stop it is akin to trying to halt the incoming tide.

Growing cities need land, and they are going to take it, come what may. The growing city is the 800-pound gorilla that is going to sit wherever it pleases. This particular observation does not sit well with some people, especially those who believe that rural is good, urban is bad, and the conversion of agricultural land to nonagricultural uses is a very bad thing indeed.

Many critics, when they contemplate the modern metropolitan frontier, find only noisome chaos. They fulminate against what they consider its casual, unplanned, almost haphazard character. They complain that it has been shaped by a host of individual, pragmatic, economic decisions rather than by any great overarching vision, that it is the expression of raw commercial forces, not of any aesthetic ideal.

The critics are wrong. The modern metropolitan frontier actually is surprisingly orderly, far more orderly than most people realize, but its order is imposed by the wishes and desires of ordinary, individual human beings, as manifest by the hidden hand of the market, not by their institutions nor by the wisdom of those who consider themselves its sages.

But, you may say, the frontier is shaped by the decisions of developers, and I will respond that developers are not nearly as free to make capricious decisions as you may think they are. The primary goal of developers or entrepreneurs, which-

ever you choose to call them, is to make lots of money, and they can make lots of money only if they can produce and deliver what their fellow citizens want and are willing and able to pay for.

People like space. They like their own homes on their own private lots. People like mobility. They like their own set of wheels, the ability to travel when and where they wish. Planners and architects, on the other hand, believe that cars are bad and high densities are good. These prejudices put them at odds with ordinary people, who believe the exact opposite, and people are willing to put their money where their wishes are. Successful developers are clever enough to give them what they want—and to take their money—while the planners and architects can only wring their hands and fulminate.

What can anyone do about it? Perhaps the people at the grass roots may long for protection against the hidden hand of the market, and perhaps they do not, but in either case only rarely do they command the skills and the economic resources they need to do anything about it on their own. Political action becomes necessary.

One of the principal functions of government is to protect society against the excesses of the market, and those who lack economic muscle must invoke the political process and learn to work the levers of political power. The citizenry who dislike developments on the modern metropolitan frontier must learn to mobilize and exercise their political power if they wish to forestall and prevent those developments that they deem undesirable.

Planning is the euphemism for the governmental process that is used to control development. Planners are an arrogant lot. They assume that they are somehow wiser than mere ordinary mortals. They decide what they think people ought to want, and then they try to cram it down their throats instead of trying to find out what the people actually do want. In reality developers are more democratic than planners.

Planning seems to work best in highly centralized and autocratic polities, where it can be imposed from above, where the ordinary people at the grass roots have little say in the decision-making process.

Even in paternalistic democracies, where the Better People decide what is right and proper for the Great Unwashed, the duly elected officials and their bureaucrats can impose their will upon society. Planning has been considerably less successful in egalitarian democracies, such as the United States, where planners have had to learn to give people what they want, instead of trying to force them to accept what the planners think they ought to have.

Planners and other critics of the conversion of farmland to nonfarm use in the United States have not yet been able to beget a compelling rationale that can convince the citizenry of the desirability, much less the necessity, of preserving farmland and preventing development on the rural/urban fringe.

They began by fussing and fuming about the loss of food production, but that argument simply will not wash. The United States enjoys—but perhaps suffers is a better word—the luxury of an abundance, even a surfeit, of first-class farmland.

For the past half-century or more the basic problem that has bedeviled agricultural policy-makers in the United States has been restricting production, not increasing it. American farmers already are producing more than they can sell, swap, or even give away, and on very short order they could better than double their production of any commodity you care to name. All they need is the incentive to do so.

And the United States is not losing farmland at any significant rate. At current rates of conversion the nation will run out of farmland in about five hundred years. Let me remind you that it has been almost exactly five hundred years since Columbus first set foot in the New World. An awful lot can happen in half a millennium, and I think it is too soon to start worrying.

Perhaps the problem is more serious in countries that are short of good farmland, but with increasing global interdependence I wonder whether any case can be made anywhere for the preservation of farmland for food production. Our problem within the foreseeable future is not going to be producing enough food, but getting it into the hands and the mouths of the people who need it.

The proponents of farmland preservation are going to have to make a far better case, a case that is intellectually defensible and politically persuasive. I think they can base a more defensible case on amenity, on the desirability of preserving open space, but it is going to be a very hard sell politically.

Perhaps the time may come when we will be willing to pay farmers to be museum-keepers, to serve as custodians and caretakers of an open countryside to which city folk can enjoy outings.

The preservation of the countryside for amenity is a very elitist concept, and it is going to be far harder to sell to the body politic than horror stories of starvation and famine in other parts of the world. It is also more honest.

My conclusion is simple. The modern metropolitan frontier on the rural/urban fringe is an arena of ceaseless conflict, of constant tension. It is the battleground between the economic power of those who wish to develop it and the political power of those who wish to protect and preserve it as it is. The development of this frontier will be shaped by economic forces unless the citizenry mobilize the political will and power to block them.

Those of us who are teachers, and especially teachers of geography, have a special responsibility for helping our students, who are ever more metropolitan, to learn to understand and appreciate the countryside, to be aware of the forces that are shaping it, and to cast wise and enlightened votes about the decisions and policies that will shape this newest frontier of contemporary society.