

Concluding Comments on the Conference Theme

David Grossman
Bar Ilan University*

The description, discussion, and methodological approaches to urban-rural spatial problems presented in this issue are insufficient for grasping the full implications of this complex theme. Two of the major questions which arise are *how or why have the characteristics of the fringe emerged? and is it beneficial or harmful, or, what is the prevalent outcome: harmony or conflict?* The answer to the first question may seem to be simple, but can we grade the factors at work? Is it possible to isolate important forces from less significant ones? The second question is even harder to answer. The impact of facts may be colored by value systems, by ideologies, and by a host of other subjective factors. Its implications for planning are evident, especially where the unplanned outcome is deemed undesirable. Whatever the plan, however, it is never free of some value-judgement. It may be imposed by politicians or by the pressure of concerned citizens, but by its very nature, it is value-oriented.

The comments which Fraser Hart was invited to present address themselves to both questions. In his first essay Hart clearly 'blames' the combustion engine for the creation of the space which emerged in the twentieth century. It accounts for blurring international differences in settlement structure, and for obliterating the formerly clear lines which distinguished between *urbs* and *rur*. The twentieth century process was uni-directional. This is natural because the combustion engine ushered in this century and dominated it at least to its last decade. The implication of this explanation is important. It fits well with the conviction that there was no 'turnaround', 'counterurbanization', or 'rural renaissance'. The urban wave is continuously pushing the countryside outwards. David Amiran, who was asked to react to Hart's opinions, appears to agree. He points out to the problems created by the planners' uncritical use of one of the most familiar spatial models, that of Christaller, disregarding the fact that it was largely based on pre-combustion engine technology.

The spatial impact of the motor car or the tractor is hardly disputable. But, are we right in giving so much weight to a single factor? The twentieth century was also the century of the transistor, television, nuclear energy, computers, missiles, and travel to outer space. It produced many other outstanding achievements which had unprecedented impact on our spatial activities. How do they affect the rural-urban system? Some weight must also be given to socio-economic factors:

* Department of Geography, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel.

rising living standards, the spreading countryside idyll, and changing labor force needs and political ideologies. Hart may argue that the impact of these trends is strongly affected by the spread of the combustion engine. Still, many scholars have already noticed the onset of emancipation from the engine. They have envisioned the creation of new regional systems ranging from vast 'ecumenopoli' to 'world villages'. Is this so? The question cannot be discussed in sufficient depth here. Hart may, after all, be right in singling out the combustion engine as the most important factor of our century, but even so, it is intriguing to consider the factors and trends which are laying the foundation for the spatial patterns of the approaching next century.

Hart's answer to the second question, which is the subject of his paper on the metropolitan frontier, is more controversial. Are we supposed to give up any resistance to the 'power of the purse' in conflicts over farmland preservation? Hart's value judgements on the role of the free market is certainly opposed to that of the proponents of sustainable land use. Even though they may differ on certain subjects, Amiran supports the view that political interference is necessary for protecting the land from urban encroachment. He points to the scarcity of prime agricultural land in the tiny State of Israel, which contrasts with the rich United States, but his argument applies even to huge Canada, as can be concluded from Troughton's keynote article. The perceived severity of the pressure on local resources has undoubtedly played some role in shaping the opinions, values, and priorities of many other geographers and planners.

These value-laden issues, as well as the causes of spatial processes, are likely to continue to be subject of controversy. The disagreement is welcome. It stimulates the thinking and rethinking of our basic ideas, and hopefully it will eventually motivate us to conduct better research which will enhance and widen our knowledge of spatial processes as well as the methods for coping with them.