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Henry L. Hunker

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Issues in Urban Economics

By

HARVEY S. PERLOFF and LOWDON WINGO, JR.

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press for Resources for the Future. 1968

Pp. x, 668, \$15.00

It is perhaps symptomatic of the times that a volume dealing with major issues facing urban society today should be reviewed in a journal concerned with natural resources. This may reflect the fact that, in the broadest sense, the urban society is a part of the nation's resource base. Certainly the allocation of space to various uses and the utilization of resources are discussed in this publication, although the authors' concern is hardly restricted to an evaluation of these matters in terms of the natural environment alone. In another light, the presence of this review may show that the problems confronting urban society are, in reality, problems of the total society. Surely an understanding of the issues rooted in an urban setting is vital to those who would be well-informed about society generally.

This volume, essentially a collection of 16 papers, is the product of the highly creative minds of several economists and planners. These papers were presented at a conference in 1967 sponsored by the Committee on Urban Economics of Resources for the Future. The editors suggest that the collection climaxes eight years of effort "... to advance the field of urban economics. . . ." Here in one volume is a thoughtful discussion of many of the major economic and policy issues confronting the cities. Because there has been relatively little published that so effectively presents the case, this volume serves an important need. It can be read profitably both by professionals and by students of urban economics. One is inclined to agree that the editors' goal may have been achieved. The papers do successfully "... propagate the excitement of what is to be discovered in the coming years that can change the nature of cities."

These papers are more significant for the issues they raise than for the findings presented. The variety of ideas put forth by the several authors is most valuable, especially with respect to the research alternatives uncovered. But because numerous issues are discussed and because a tight organizational pattern is missing, it is virtually impossible to single out papers for individual comment.

The basic approach is the recognition of urban economics as a field of interest which centers upon policy issues that relate to the vitality of the cities. Subjects include the economic growth and stagnation of cities, transportation problems, the impact of national policies and expenditures upon local government, urban development

policy, and others. The focus of these papers is upon the American city, but the findings may be applied in other areas as well.

The book is divided into four parts, each treating a major theme from several points of view: Part I is a consideration of The Urban Community Within the National Economy; Part II looks at Intra-metropolitan Development from several vantage points; Part III considers The Urban Public Economy; and Part IV centers upon Policy Issues in the urban setting. The writers are highly individualistic and the papers self-contained. Each paper has a comprehensive bibliography.

In a sense, Part IV, which consists of a single paper on "Public Policy for Urban America," most effectively brings together the ideas generated elsewhere in the book. Public policy considerations play a major role in shaping the development of urban economics. Policy decisions may strongly affect the principal areas of urban research, specifically studies in transportation and poverty. The questions of how urban policy is shaped and how it is responded to are stressed.

Although the authors recognize that a federal urban policy may not be realistic, they indicate that a broad-scale regional planning program may make sense, especially with such "hard" programs as urban renewal or mass transit. Ultimately, they question the leadership that has been available to initiate and carry through urban programs. One might also question the adequacy of traditional concepts and tools used in dealing with core issues.

Issues in Urban Economics raises more questions than it answers. It provides insight into a range of socio-economic problems confronting society at the policy level. It also offers ideas and techniques, both old and new (such as econometric models and regional projections), to clarify the issues while challenging the reader and, ultimately, society. The editors declare that economists have long been guilty of "... only nibbling at the edges" with respect to these issues. In all fairness, isn't this the guilt of society at large?

HENRY L. HUNKER*

*Professor of Geography and Director of the Center for Community and Regional Analysis, Ohio State University.