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Great Plains Studies, Center for

August 1992

Great Plains Research Introduction - Vol. 2, No. 2, 1992

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Kay, Paul A., "Great Plains Research Introduction - Vol. 2, No. 2, 1992" (1992). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 79.

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INTRODUCTION

Most Americans possess an image of the Great Plains derived, I suspect, from a high-speed window. The interstate highways, those great passing-through routes, provide constricted views; I-80, for example, trapped in the Platte River Valley across much of Nebraska, leads one to think of the Plains as flat. The image from 30,000-plus feet is no less informative, to the untrained observer, of the web of life below; even the giant circles of the center pivots bespeak large empty spaces. Neither viewing platform is sufficient to reveal the intricacies of the Plains, let alone the concerns of those who live here. When Frank Popper and Deborah Popper published their analysis showing a large number of distressed counties in the Great Plains, it was probably a conditioned evocation of such superficial images that enabled them to suggest a policy of planned depopulation and return to a "Buffalo Commons."

The debate that the Poppers' publications have provoked has a most curious form, bringing the rational into uneasy conjunction with the emotional. The Poppers' work was based on dispassionate quantitative analyses, but the lack of a documented scientific report allowed visceral responses to dominate. Definitions of terms, justifications of measures and methods, and evaluation of results typical of scientific discourse have been lacking or submerged. The first three papers in this issue attempt to bring some rational framework back into the discussion. The papers are based on presentations in a special session at the 1991 annual meeting of the Great Plains-Rocky Mountain Division of the Association of American Geographers. The authors, all Plains-based, surely have a bias opposite that of the New Jersey-based Poppers. It is not this opposition of bias but the attempt to apply

analytical considerations that makes the articles worthwhile. Karen De Bres and Mark Guizlo raise some methodological issues in the identification of the distressed counties. They lead us to question whether appropriate assumptions and measures are being used, and more deeply whether the concept of "development" as defined and applied in populous areas is appropriate for the Plains. Stephen White shows that recent population change has not been uniform across the area overlying the Ogallala Aquifer. His analyses indicate the complex relationship of growth to increasing irrigation and urbanization, and suggest that other approaches to regional development should be investigated. Alec Paul recounts the Canadian experience, where the landscape envisioned by the Poppers seems to be emerging without benefit of an overarching plan. Transnational studies of perception, government policy, and planning would be very useful to elucidate the issues in the debate.

As the debate continues, it will have to incorporate the results of studies of processes and patterns in the natural and social systems of the Plains, such as the following four articles represent. Richard Sutton details a careful study of the ecology of volunteer fencerows and planted hedgerows. Exotic species were more common in the fencerows, and hedgerow composition depended on management scheme, related to landowner attitudes. The jointly-authored study of chromosomes in Blue Grama grass, documenting pentaploidy for the first time, is published as a memorial to T. Tsuchiya, who died before this issue went to press. The ecological significance is not established, as obvious morphological traits do not seem to be related to chromosome number. If portions of the Great Plains are to revert to pre-white settlement conditions, how will questions of valuation and disposition be define and settled? Daniel Overton's historic study of the sale of Otoe-Missouria reservation lands to whites raises some disturbing questions about equity that may yet recur. Finally, Andrew Koszewski's interpretation of the legal community of Lincoln, NE a century ago should be read with Donald Landon's report on the rural bar of our time (*Great Plains Research* 2:67). Although some significant differences are apparent, one also has the feeling that *le plus c'est change, le plus c'est la même chose*. How much, one wonders, have the natural and social systems of the Great Plains remained the same, and what lessons does such timelessness hold as we contemplate the future?

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