

# LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

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The year 2017 marks the start of the second decade of the *Agora Journal of Urban Planning and Design*. It also marks an historic shift in the body politic of the United States. Two attributes of this new era, at least, are notable and troubling. They include, first, a decline in civility and, second, a growing rift between city and country, or urban and rural. I ponder the causes of these two phenomena, how they are related, and what they portend for urban planning.

Early on in ancient Greece, the agora was the area in the city “where free-born citizens could gather to hear civic announcements, muster for military campaigns, or discuss politics,” while later it defined the open-air market-place of the city.<sup>1</sup> Modern notions of civility and citizenship take their origins from and are bound up in the ancient city—a place where people met and engaged a host of inter-dependent relationships—familial, political, commercial—toward the betterment of their society. For the first time in recorded human history there are now more urban residents than rural, and we see today in the U.S. a resurgent interest in reinvigorated city life. Yet a substantial portion of our country’s population remains decidedly not-city, and they express great indifference to—if not disdain for—urban life, often in very uncivil terms. What’s going on, and how might urban planners respond?

There are some great ironies in the recent turn of events. A denizen of the city has won the hearts and minds of much of rural America. A businessman who made his wealth on urban real estate and the attractions of city life claims a political sensibility fixed on notions of independence (certainly not inter-dependence) and an asocial responsibility for oneself and one’s family alone. I do not mean to suggest that rural Americans have been hoodwinked, or that they inherently lack a sense of civility. If anything, I believe our new president has proven masterful at tapping into real and existential fears. That distinction is an important one to draw, because it suggests that the president is not himself the message but rather the messenger. Something real is indeed going on beneath all the commotion, something we need acknowledge and address.

A goal of this issue of *Agora* is to “represent a wide range of perspectives on the urban experience, the issues that urban inhabitants face, and creative ways to reconceptualize cities toward the shared benefit of all who live in them.” I do not expect that the authors of this issue had the recent election in mind, or contemplated the growing rift between urban and rural, when they wrote and submitted their work. I hope, however, that a better understanding of just these attributes of the city might help us better respond to its detractors, and perhaps even revisit notions of civility and citizenship at the same time. Please engage this issue of *Agora* with our unique historical context in mind, and please do so with an eye toward promoting a fruitful dialogue that might lead to greater mutual understanding and appreciation—especially between urban and rural—rather than continued, uncivil decline.

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1. Ancient History Encyclopedia (<http://www.ancient.eu/agora/>)