DIRECTLY DEMOCRATIC METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT: ENVISIONING BEYOND OPPRESSION, REBELLION, AND REFORM[1]

by Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. and Khulda Bat Sarah

As a teacher of community organizing at the UCLA School of Social Welfare in the 1970s, Professor Warren Haggstrom articulated an engaging view of Los Angeles as a polity. He once said that "Los Angeles can be understood best as an underdeveloped city—complex in the sense that large dinosaurs were complex—without being adequately guided by its own ideas."[2] That was several decades ago, but the comparison is still apt.

This failing of municipal governance can lead those riding "the tail of the dinosaur" to demand political independence by the secession of large districts from within urban cities and counties. Secession is particularly attractive to relatively affluent residents[3] who see the possibility of using their political and economic wherewithal to avoid bearing the "costs of concentrated poverty."[4] And despite the 2002 defeat of secession ballot measures in Los Angeles, such motives are not likely to be sidetracked permanently, because these initiatives are often resurrected for decades until they finally pass.

There's a long list of reasons why the City of Los Angeles and other large urban municipalities should not be the exclusive local governments for millions of citizens—the secessionists certainly have that right. But before we consider why secession is such a misguided idea, let's consider how it gained so much momentum.

Demise of Local Government

While cities continue to grow larger and more ungovernable, the means of their governance remain virtually unchanged. Consider the City of Los Angeles: 15 members of the city council hold *all* the public powers that are essential to govern more than three and a half million citizens. Notwith-

standing the launching of advisory neighborhood councils, there hasn't been any discernable change in who controls the public powers to enact ordinances, police, regulate, tax, spend, contract, incur indebtedness, or exercise eminent domain.

During the last century, cities throughout the country, including Los Angeles, grew into bureaucratic behemoths though relentless annexation and consolidation of small towns within their "sphere of influence."[5] The San Fernando Valley was once home to a number of small towns.[6] The consequence of their demise is "local government" that cannot meaningfully be described as either *local* or *government*, at least insofar as those terms imply accessibility and inclusive political participation.

Our so-called "local" public officials, elected to represent districts with huge constituencies, have fled the arena of *citizen* dialogue and decisions about civic affairs, except for purposes of public relations. They have in effect become members of a board of affluent-elect that oversees a centralized, bureaucratic enterprise. Mandated ongoingly by a media-manipulated minority of the eligible electorate to supervise public monopolies, they primarily act as sub rosa negotiators of compromises with well-organized and well-endowed elites, pluralities, and special interests. Professional lobbyists representing real estate firms, construction and development companies, banking and finance institutions, unions, media conglomerates, and the like, have become the citizenry served by the City's bureaucratic polity. It does not resemble what a century ago the citizens called "local government."

The colossal size of bureaucratized city government, as the means to deliver services and to regulate and rule politically, negates the conventional demands of political representation. With

voting constituencies in the hundreds of thousands, political participation costs for the citizenry are exorbitant. For the individual or grassroots group trying to influence decisions at City Hall, it's a Kafkaesque exercise in futility. For those unable to meet the ante, whose day-to-day interests are *not* represented by the high-powered lobbyist-denizens of the Los Angeles municipal government, elected officials are objects of fear and scorn. We typically fear them in their presence and scorn them in their absence. For most of us, local government is an historical artifact.

In a manner of speaking, we were forewarned of the consequences of bureaucratized polity. Following his visit to this country in the early 1830s, the French nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that centralized bureaucracy would be the "despotism democratic nations have to fear" in the future. He described a new type of public organization, for which he acknowledged having no name, an organization that would "degrade without [physically] tormenting." A powerful force for promoting social isolation and undermining community, serving as the unsatisfactory arbiter and guarantor of equality, it would continuously narrow the space (i.e., rights, roles, and resources) for civic action until the citizenry is reduced to "a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd."[7] Seemingly we have arrived at the place de Tocqueville imagined.

What is it about bureaucracy that fosters such objectionable outcomes? The inherent anomaly of a bureaucratized polity like the City of Los Angeles is its domination by a single center of decision-making. The result is a complicated, costly, and error-prone system of communication and control.[8]

Moreover, the City's monopolization of services reduces its sensitivity to large-scale *diseconomies*. Municipal monopoly is an incentive for the City to realize cost savings, improving the appearance of effectiveness and efficiency, by placing greater burdens on consumers. To the continuous pain and resentment of citizens with low to moderate incomes who find it difficult to move out of the City when its governance is offensive, burdensome, or simply inept, the City has defined "producer efficiency" without reference to "consumer utility."[9] This scenario is made all the more possible in the absence of empowered democratic participation by the citizenry.[10]

The secession-initiative campaigns reveal self-interested collective action, although disproportionately by upscale segments of the citizenry. It's what we should expect under the circumstances. And if that's true, why shouldn't some of the Los Angeles districts secede? If big is bad, shouldn't smaller be good? But if secession is not the solution, what is?

Challenges of Empowerment

The urban history of the last half-century leaves little doubt that state and federal governments have not provided effective policies and fiscal appropriations in response to urban poverty, oppression, and injustice,[11] although they demonstrate varying degrees of ineffectiveness. We can see, in reaction to the shortfalls, accelerating movements—driven from both the top down and the bottom up—increasingly focused on the notable *structural* deficiencies of urban government.[12]

Thus, in coming decades, we will increasingly want to envision and vivify a form of urban government that can economically *and* politically empower the myriad constituencies in established and incipient urban geo-political spheres, from neighborhoods to districts and metropolitan regions.

The secession of mid- to large-size districts, encompassing Hollywood, San Pedro, and the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles, as proposed and defeated in 2002, would not have accomplished those empowerment objectives. We have no reason to believe they would have relieved the alienation of ethnic and cultural neighborhoods and constituencies from the exercise of *public powers*. But had they succeeded, they doubtlessly would have diminished the economic advantages of metropolitan boundaries, while simultaneously excluding empowered neighborhood jurisdictions from consideration as worthwhile producers of economic and political "public goods." There is every reason to think that a newly formed San Fernando Valley city of more than one and a half million residents would emerge merely as another large and unresponsive bureaucratized polity.

Determining the optimum form of metropolitan government pits us against more than a century of misinformation and momentum that have subverted *progressive* structural reform of urban government. Two streams of tendentious ideological and intellectual theorizing have dominated proposals, planning, and practice to improve urban "local government." The basic tension between them has centered on the issue of whether the best strategy is consolidation of municipalities within an urban area, thus promoting governance by unitary metropolitan government; or, contrariwise, whether the best strategy is to increase the number of municipalities within an urban area, thus promoting governance by municipalities competing in a public services marketplace. The tension also reveals different priorities given to the claimed economic advantages of large "scale" versus political advantages of stronger democratic "voice."[13]

What, if anything, do these two conceptualizations have in common? Both are championed from the top down by academic and professional proponents who profess to be without ideological bias; both implicitly claim exclusive theoretical insight and policy validity; and both summarily reject the practicability of directly democratic citizen participation in urban governance.[14]

Withal, the history of attempts to restructure the governance of Los Angeles has shown that, ". . . while questions of size and boundaries of local government are important, the real political cleavage in cities is not fundamentally between separationists and consolidationists, but remains one between those who favour democratization, social justice and ecological integrity and those who hope instead to protect the market economy (and the privileges and unequal freedoms associated with it) from what they regard as inappropriate efforts to impose social controls."[15]

Municipal Reformers

From the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth, the consensus among proponents of "municipal reform" has been that the existence of many municipalities within an urban area is politically divisive and economically inefficient. They have consistently promoted consolidation of urban municipalities to achieve the ideal of a single, unitary metropolitan government.

The earliest and most influential rationales for municipal reform were Woodrow Wilson's *Congressional Government*[16] and Frank J. Goodnow's *Politics and Administration*.[17] Wilson believed the state should have a single center of power, and constitutional separations and balances are little more than a facade. He proposed that as power becomes more divided, it becomes less responsible. Goodnow's approach to city government highlighted the distinction between politics and administration, advocating the reforms of bureaucratic hierarchy, efficiency, and professional discipline.

Max Weber's writing on bureaucracy supported Wilson's central themes.[18] Weber thought bureaucracies inherently rational and efficient. His belief was that, while government may have different political objectives, good administration has but one form: hierarchical organization with top-down authority directing technically trained civil servants. Its efficiency and effectiveness presumably could be measured in economic terms: maximum output at minimum cost. And derivative principles of municipal reform have been repeated ever since, including: widening span of control, functional departmentalization, unity of command, consolidation of authority in unit heads, and centralization in

a chief executive—all easily identifiable characteristics of our big city governments.

After 1900, virtually every major city in the country created a "municipal reform bureau" to promote these principles of local government.[19] Undoubtedly, many of the municipal reformers were morally motivated by the horrendous living conditions of the urban poor and the indifference of the industrial corporations that employed them. More to the point, however, ". . . the major initiators of structural reforms came primarily from the cities' top business leadership and upper-class elite . . . to take formal political power from the previously dominant lower- and middle-class elements so that they might advance their own conception of desirable public policy."[20] Well-known industrial capitalists, seeing that the political machines could no longer control the increasing demands of urban industrial workers, bankrolled the movement.

The reform principles were rationalized by theory that served distinct capitalist interests, with little or no scientific foundation. Nonetheless, with ample financial backing and an engaging theoretical rationale, municipal reformers justified reducing the number of governments within metropolitan areas, increasing the size of governments, reducing the number of elected officials, placing greater reliance on hierarchical control, and replacing smaller towns and limited-authority special districts with cities and counties having general authority. The effect has been to treat citizens in their local communities as incompetent to govern themselves and to contract together by petition and election to form public organizations for that purpose.

The main economic advantage of municipal reform has been that the boundaries of larger urban areas are more viable for the production of a particular class of public goods and services.

Regrettably, the claims of municipal reformers for improvements in efficiency and effectiveness have served to obscure a mixed bag of outcomes, although the reformers have largely met their own objectives for transforming institutions of urban governance. Their avowed objectives included ". . . the model city charter, the council manager plan, city management professionalism, and bureaucratic service delivery."[21]

The net effect of these municipal reform innovations, and several others noted above, has been a tendency to move urban governance and services ever farther from citizen accessibility, accountability, and control. Stunningly, the municipal reform political science scholars and professional practitioners nonetheless do not regard the diminution of democratic participation as substantively diminishing their overwhelming success.

We might reasonably conclude that the self-congratulatory rhetoric and writing of municipal reformers, applauding their own institutional innovations, marks them as indifferent to the last half-century's urban governance shortcomings, especially the systemic failures of big-city municipalities to stamp out corrupt special-interest influence on development.[22] The commonplace city council culture is that the members *informally* recognize one another's prerogatives in their own districts over real estate and development decisions, including city construction contracts, and their entitlement to short-circuit the recommendations of planning departments and commissions, affordable housing requirements, zoning and land-use rules, and tax levies—all of which adds up to an irresistible invitation to corruption.[23]

Without viable options for citizens to hold their elected representatives accountable, corruption[24] and the favoritism of city councils towards special-interest demands[25] almost certainly leads them to substantially misallocate the resources needed to remedy failing infrastructure, shortages of housing for low- for middle-income residents, deficient recreational facilities and public schools that serve minority and low-income populations, unreliable public transportation, etc. Under the circumstances, "Immigration under conditions of socioeconomic inequity, racism and political disenfranchisement has created highly uneven urban space. . . ."[26]

Of course, one outcome of urban elected officials who have been unresponsive to the demands of low-income and minority populations, even with their greater representation on city councils, has been our scaling up of faith-based and community organizing over the last several decades. But despite innumerable successful grassroots campaigns, municipal reform apparently has managed to bring about the nearly total alienation of the citizenry from local government, as confirmed by the extraordinarily low turnouts for municipal elections.[27] The net uploading effect arguably includes a generalized privatization of regional, statewide, and national problems that in the past were considered matters of public debate, a negative bias and withdrawal of interest and day-to-day involvement in virtually all the activity of higher levels of government.[28]

Overall, the municipal reform tradition, as characterized by Vincent Ostrom, has been "the disease rather than the doctor" of American public administration.[29] So if in the past the call was to municipal reform, it ought now to be, "*reform* municipal reform."[30]

Polycentricity & Public Choice

A competing theory and practice of public administration emerged in the last several decades as an alternative to municipal reform, usually identified as the Tiebout model[31] or "public choice."[32] For many of its advocates, it's underpinned by the theory of polycentricity.

Ostrom points out that the founders of the nation consciously adopted a compound, polycentric model of government, in contrast to the monocentric British national form. He reconstructs from his reading of *The Federalist*, the theory implicit in a "compound" federal republic—our combined federal, state, and local governments. Ostrom identifies its distinguishing feature as the balancing of powers rather than their separation.[33] He posits that each level of government offsets the powers of the government above it, enabling citizens to act politically through cities and counties to somewhat balance the states' powers, and to act through the states to restrain federal power.

Over the past several decades, public choice political-economists have examined various organizational patterns for producing public goods and services.[34] Their approach has been to evaluate the outcomes of organizational decision-making arrangements under a wide variety of conditions.[35] They conclude that not all polycentric systems are productive but that they may be optimized by varying the dimensions of their design. They take *individual public choice* from the bottom up—in contrast to expert determinations of *need* from the top down—as their basic unit of an analysis.[36] The overall view of this model is that maximum performance of public organizations in achieved when they are competing with one another in a marketplace of public goods and services.

One of the weaknesses of the pure public choice model, however, has been its emphasis on individual demands, in contrast to the demands of many individuals purposefully organized to take action together.[37] It is an inherent bias that overlooks the exclusive role and critical importance of organized political participation by the citizenry.

Moreover, if we project public choice to its logical conclusion, we might suppose, along with many of its critics, it will lead to the fragmenting of local government. According to proponents of the ideal form of public choice, there cannot be too many competing incorporated municipalities in a metropolitan region. Such an arrangement, however, arguably will produce a dysfunctional fragmentation that disincentivizes intergovernmental cooperation. Thus the critics of the public choice approach interpret it as endorsing the fragmentation of local government into multiple competing juris-

dictions, undermining the potential advantages of unitary metropolitan governance.

Despite the contradiction, at least some public choice proponents have been known to ". . . *support* [metropolitan] functional consolidation or cooperation to achieve economies of scale and efficiency in provision of selected services."[38] (Emphasis added.)

However, another penetrating criticism of public choice, based on its historical application in Los Angeles County, is that by incentivizing the formation of many new independent municipalities within the county, the result has been to intensify economic inequities and to reinforce racist, discriminatory policies.[39]

Hybrid Metropolitan Governance

The view of many academics and professional public administration practitioners is that neither municipal reform nor public choice can overcome all the challenges of urban governance. In effect, neither a focus on combating municipal fragmentation by consolidation of municipalities into larger units of governance, nor the development of a market-like environment for increasing numbers of competing municipalities, will be a sufficient antidote to the shortcomings of our urban governance.[40]

The theoretical discontinuities between municipal reform and public choice notwithstanding, it's not unreasonable, as we describe below in more detail, to conceive of two tiers of urban government—neighborhood and metropolitan—in a relationship that is essentially cooperative rather than conflicted, each tier recognizing and employing its own and the other's capabilities and limitations in providing goods and services, and in democratization of political regulation and rule. This two-tier, hybrid model envisions neighborhood assemblies with limited grants of public powers, which are subdivisions of the urban city (or eventually of a metropolitan government), and thus not independent municipalities. So they would continue in many respects to be bound by the taxing and regulatory authority of the urban city or subsequent metropolitan government.

Going beyond municipal reform's measures of organizational performance, which are based on the ratio of goods produced to their production costs, public choice prompts us to look at production *and* consumption costs. Doing so ensures that "social costs" will be included in measures of performance by including consumers' burdens, such as travel and waiting times.

The principal consideration in shaping a two-tier system of urban governance is the production of public goods and services.[41] The complete criteria for evaluating government performance include:

(1) efficiency—the ratio of production benefits (output) to costs (input); (2) effectiveness—the quality of service as a function of cost; (3) equity—the provision of special services to meet special needs; (4) equality—the provision of equal service for equal status; and (5) accountability—ensuring citizen access and control.

However, the commonly accepted criterion to guide how best to meet the challenges of metropolitan governance has been referred to as "smart growth."[42] In other words, the ideal has been to achieve institutional arrangements that reduce the costs of governments while maximizing their potential benefits. The most obvious limitation of this perspective is that benefits are virtually always calculated, for all practical purposes, only in relation to economic viability and service provision.[43]

What, then, are some of the fundamentals affecting "smart growth" in a hybrid two-tier form of urban government? Overall, in a capitalist economy like ours, goods that can be divided and packaged for consumption according to the preferences of individuals—toothpaste sold in small tubes is the classic example—are usually in the *private* economy. Because such goods are divided, however, individuals who can't or won't pay for them don't get a share.

Purely *public* goods and services are indivisible and, once produced, they are (at least theoretically) accessible to everyone whether or not they pay for them. The costs of public goods and services are apportioned through taxes on the total population (again, at least theoretically, but more about that to come). Water purification, air pollution control, paving and maintaining city streets, and responsibility for coordinating responses to epidemics and other widespread threats to public health, are examples of indivisible public goods. These, then, should primarily be the responsibility of an upper tier.

These principles are not absolute, because some divisible goods and services are also produced publicly to ensure the welfare of the disabled and disadvantaged, and to lessen hardship for those who can't pay for essentials. When a good or service affects everyone equally by conditioning the whole environment, as with police patrols or mosquito spraying, it may be provided publicly. And, of course, some indivisible goods nonetheless are produced privately.

"Public bads" are the opposite of public goods. What one individual regards as a private good may be bad when considered as a matter of the public interest—say, for instance, a teenager who spray-paints gang graffiti on a public building, or a Malibu beach-front homeowner who illegally restricts access to a public beach. While the main goal of

bureaucratic urban government has been the production of public goods, typically by increasing the quantity of facilities and services, there is an equally important need to eliminate public bads. Often the yield from government investment is greater on balance from achieving more effective usage of facilities, reducing public bads, than by increasing their quantity. Unfortunately, highly bureaucratized urban governments are notable for their inability to reduce or eliminate public bads by exerting influence on public behavior, which is an arena in which face-to-face relationships are the sine qua non. These, then, should primarily be the responsibility of a lower tier.

The need for small-scale jurisdictions with public powers to reduce public bads is both chronic and acute in our large cities. Los Angeles, for example, has had major gang activity over generations, with gang-related crime spiking on and off over decades. This problem has been closely linked to a centrally directed police force regarded historically by lower-income and working-class ethnic and cultural communities as an "occupying power." Although police practices have improved and gang activity diminished in Los Angeles over the last decade, these improvements barely mask the continuation of significant gang-related activity and problems,[44] and violent crime—partially related to gang violence—spiked more than 20 percent in 2015.[45]

Production of a public good involves a "deal" between the government and its "sponsors" (i.e., the taxpaying citizenry). The resulting benefits or burdens that *spill over* the city's boundaries, affecting people living nearby, are known as "externalities" or "spillovers." A simple example is animal control, paid for by L.A. taxpayers, which spills over unearned benefits outside of the City by preventing stray animals from crossing its boundaries into adjoining cities, while a power generation plant within the city limits may spill over burdens in the form of wastes that are buried in another city. Urban public goods differ dramatically in their geographic implications, with spillover boundaries ranging from neighborhood to region. It's these infinitely variable spillovers of public goods that must be taken into account when considering the most economically effective form of government for metropolitan areas.

Each public good or service has an optimum scale of organization for production. Economies of large scale are associated with capital-intensive production, such as sewage treatment, power generation, water supply, and mass transit. Economies that can be achieved by small-scale organizations include labor-intensive activities, such as teaching, maintenance, inspection, and police foot patrols.

Withal, an outline of what should urban government reform look like in the twentieth-first century is emerging. We have more than an inkling of what we should do about our governments that, by their very structure, even assuming good intentions on the part of those who guide them, inter hope and spirit, and poison human potential by their alienation of the citizenry. We understand that we must counter the destructive policies and practices of bureaucratized urban polities which, despite virtually having a monopoly on politics and the production and distribution of public goods, are often incapable of economy and efficiency, never mind equality, equity and accountability?

Recognition of the compound federal structure as a stable, productive polycentric system, composed of numerous federated governments, is the first and essential step in developing a twenty-first century vision and strategy for urban government, retrieving it from the domination of centralized bureaucratic monopolies. The obvious solution is neither in the vein of traditional municipal reform consolidation or public choice municipal multiplication, but a hybrid two-tier urban federation, initially with large urban municipalities serving as the upper tier. Ideally, the large-city upper-tier would eventually be supplanted by true metropolitan government resulting from city-county consolidation, statewide ballot initiative, and/or a bill passed by the state legislature.[46]

Two-Tier Metropolitan Government

Although largely unreported in mainstream media[47] and unknown to the public, the vision of "radical municipalism" deserves to be mentioned in relation to restructuring urban government. Popular among activists in the anarchist tradition,[48] their goal is to achieve a post-capitalist political-economic transformation by replacing all centralized, institutional power with a confederation of libertarian, directly democratic municipalities.[49] As we have described elsewhere in detail,[50] aspects of this notion are occasionally engaging but unsurprisingly empty of institutional practicability.

We can, however, balance the existing top-heavy governing institutions with limited grants of public powers to a lower tier of government, thereby dividing public powers and functions along area-wide and neighborhood jurisdictions.[51]

The U.S. incarnation of the two-tier metropolitan model has been one in which the county becomes the upper tier, corresponding most closely to metropolitan boundaries, while existing municipalities, special districts, and school districts become the lower tier. While, as already noted, economic advantages may be realized from this restructuring, it does not address the alienation of the

citizenry from the exercise of public powers. And at least one scholar has concluded, ". . . metropolitan governments appear biased against citizen participation in their affairs. Voting turnouts for the election of metropolitan councils have usually been low. And not one of the metropolitan governments created to date has moved very effectively to involve citizens in its activities."[52] Under these circumstances, the most pressing need is to introduce public powers into *neighborhood* civil communities. The resulting grassroots empowerment would certainly moot the issue of secession for the majority.

Liberal altruists often argue, however, that public powers vested in neighborhood assemblies will intensify ethnic and racial separation, and undermine fiscal equity, isolating low-income residents and lessening their share of public resources, as was the case in establishing numerous new municipalities in Los Angeles County. But the residents of low-income and minority neighborhoods, unlike virtually all whites except those in the lowest socio-economic classes, don't get a fair share of the benefits from the present system dominated by the major urban municipal governments. Grassroots leaders in those neighborhoods might easily believe there's nothing regrettable about trading the rhetoric of integration for limited grants of public powers.[53]

Across our contemporary urban cityscapes, the relationship between rich and poor areas is more like exploitation than charitable benevolence. In effect, low- to moderate-income neighborhoods may have more to gain from acquiring public powers—winning the rights and resources to negotiate and manage their own development—than continuing to be disenfranchised in the current system.

Equally uncompelling is the argument that if public powers are granted to neighborhood assemblies, the areas with resources—that is, those producing significant tax revenues—are likely to secede, leaving those without resources to fend for themselves. But in a two-tier metropolitan federation, empowered neighborhoods would be subdivisions of a federated structure of city or county or metropolitan, state, and federal jurisdictions, not an independent government in its own right. Under the circumstances, it would be impossible to secede from their higher authority—particularly from their taxing, regulatory, and judicial powers—just as San Pedro, as a district of the City of Los Angeles, cannot secede from the County of Los Angeles and the State of California. And as we have seen from the failed secession initiatives in Los Angeles, even seceding from the authority of a major urban municipal government is difficult if not practically impossible.

Is there a positive alternative to predictions of more isolation from neighborhood empowerment? Unlike the present situation in which monopolistic city governments tend to deny political rights, roles, and resources to citizens with low to middle incomes, thus ensuring their political impotence, neighborhoods with public powers would offer practical opportunities for cooperation between disparate empowered communities, each acting in its own self-interest. There will always be positive pressures for formal and informal arrangements, mutual aid pacts, and joint powers agreements in such a polycentric system.

In Los Angeles, or any other city dominated by bureaucratized polity, neighborhoods are frequently limited to interacting only in destructive competition or conflict, at the polls or elsewhere. While both will always be with us to some degree, granting public powers to neighborhood assemblies in the context of a two-tier urban municipal government would create opportunities for self-interested cooperation. Then neighborhoods would have the public powers to successfully launch and manage cooperative initiatives with one another.

What can we expect in the way of response to a movement for two-tier urban government rooted in a lower tier of directly democratic government with public powers? Well-qualified professionals caution, "The leaders of functional fiefdoms will rigidly oppose control-sharing schemes that will diminish their own influence over urban governments, and they will support citizen representation schemes that give the appearance of shared control so long as the substance of their control is unaffected."[54]

Lower Tier Empowerment

If the majority citizenry is to have an effective voice in the governance of the big cities, our urban neighborhoods will require organizations with a mix of public powers. To successfully participate *in* governance and produce public goods and services requires a complex repertoire of organizational capabilities. Like any successful polity or enterprise, neighborhoods must be able to acquire, transform, and distribute resources. Authentic expression of our collective political and economic will demands that neighborhoods have legislative, taxing, and other public powers, although as already noted, in limited grants which reflect the essential role of an *upper* tier of urban government with broader authority and responsibility. These powers, along with a mandate to contract and assume debt, are essential to vitalize the civic rights and roles of the citizenry, and to capitalize and operate services and enterprises.

How can this vision of grassroots empowerment be achieved? There are three variations on neighborhood "empowerment" as the lower tier of urban government: by administrative decentralization, by political decentralization, and by petition and election. These alternatives are differentiated by the direction of their sponsorship, their functions and authority, the extent of their public powers, and the characteristic ways in which their authority and powers become vested.

Administrative decentralization is easily recognizable from its top-down sponsorship. Notwithstanding the so-called decentralization, it amounts to little more than an enlargement of the existing centralized bureaucracy, an ironic expansion to fix a legendary sluggishness. Branches are established at lower levels, like Boston's "little city halls," serving populations from 50,000 upwards, with low-level managers authorized to "gather input" and implement policies of centralized decision-makers. The professed goal is to upgrade the distribution of public goods and services, to improve equity and equality in addition to efficiency and economy, by more accurate measurement of need and the targeting or tailoring of service delivery. Such decentralization does have a modest effect on the delivery of services—at least travel time to city agencies is reduced—but the character of political rule and bureaucratic decision-making remain obscure and inaccessible to the citizenry. The story of the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston and its Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative illustrates that the "little city halls" have little or no effect on the bureaucratized polity of the city, thus confirming the necessity for continuous organizing of grassroots action.[55]

Political decentralization, like its administrative counterpart, is also sponsored from the top down—but the similarity ends there. Limited political authority may be granted to local organizations. The neighborhood is given a limited franchise for a limited purpose under the supervision of the city. The essence of political decentralization is not branch-management but devolution of limited decision- and policy-making authority. The neighborhood councils established in Los Angeles, governed by locally elected representatives, may evolve into this kind of decentralization, acquiring limited "collaborative" authority for some aspects of the City's programs and services.[56] Sometimes the authority of the representatives includes a "legislative" mandate, to make decisions on policy options set out by the city.

While some urban political-economists have proposed giving limited taxing authority to neighborhood councils, the practice is a non-starter and entirely without advocates among big-city mayors and managers, city councils, and elected county officials. Political decentralization doesn't exist in its ideal form. Its inescapable weakness is that by virtue of how it's created, there is no prospect that it will ever encompass essential public powers, even in limited grants. And as every municipal official knows that it's not possible to manage city government without such powers, the same is true for neighborhood government.

Petition and election, however, are means by which citizens can directly establish neighborhood organizations with public powers from the bottom up. Many states have the right of petition to bring about an initiative or referendum for charter reform. The organizations created by such actions differ clearly from their top-down-sponsored counterparts. The most important distinction between devolutionary approaches and bottom-up methods is their potential to bring about the vesting of public powers.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, the decentralization of political decision-making in Los Angeles' neighborhood councils, which potentially entails a sharing of policy-making authority, never vests any of the city's public powers in the local councils, even though the councils were created by charter reform. The same initiative and referendum tools may be used again in the future, however, to grant limited public powers to neighborhoods in such a way that their withdrawal would require extraordinary conditions and actions, much as would be needed to eliminate cities and counties.

Thus, the potential of granting public powers through initiative and referendum differs from devolutionary approaches in that neighborhoods so empowered may acquire permanent grants of the powers that are unique to governments. We may grant them limited entitlements to enact and enforce ordinances, levy taxes or service charges, exercise eminent domain, carry on policing, etc.

Neighborhood Politics & Economics

What form of governmental decision-making will ensure the democratic expression of the citizens' will at the neighborhood level? Should it be direct democracy—the "open" form of government in New England towns—in which every citizen has the right to attend and vote in the town meeting? Or should it be representative, as we have now in every city, with an elected council of a dozen or so members?

The answer hinges somewhat on the ideal size for neighborhood organizations that have limited public powers. If the metropolitan citizenry grants public powers to neighborhoods with populations of 5,000 to 10,000, the ideal for direct democracy and authentic community, some 150 to 300 such

jurisdictions would be necessary in an urban area with a population of one and a half million.

But municipal reform political-economists have concluded that, given those numbers, direct democracy would not be practicable. That's because they assume that the *metropolitan* legislative body would be far too big—supposing that its members would be neighborhood representatives.

However, a single metropolitan area like Los Angeles is in some ways comparable demographically to the country as a whole at its founding, so the legislative body for the upper tier of our metropolitan government might properly consist of an assembly—several hundred representatives from directly democratic neighborhood governments. Such a transformation would dramatically increase the accountability of every bureaucratized metropolitan polity. Although this option may be attractive theoretically, it may be far less than ideal in practice, as suggested below in considering options for upper-tier empowerment.

The municipal reform political-economists' rejection of neighborhood government reflects their observations of "little city halls," service centers, and many other decentralized organizations scaled to serve "neighborhoods" ranging from 35,000 to 250,000 residents. None of the examples ordinarily cited describe vesting of public powers in directly democratic assemblies of 5,000 to 10,000.[57] Perhaps that's because, according to some academic and professional experts, smaller-scale neighborhoods "do not reliably produce effective *representation*. Some neighborhoods simply lack the leadership cadre and institutions to articulate the interests of the residents."[58] (Emphasis added.) But this lack, if it actually exists, makes a compelling argument for directly democratic government that empowers residents to speak for themselves.

Municipal reform political-economists maintain that small, localized organizations are inherently inefficient for the delivery of services. Polycentric theory and public administration practice suggest, however, that efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability in providing public services can be improved by allocating them among governments of varying sizes. For example, urban law enforcement thus apportioned shows gains on virtually all measures of performance.[59] Support functions (records, communications, laboratory services, detention, training, etc.) may be allocated to the metropolitan area; fighting crime (capture of criminals, stakeouts, SWAT activities, etc.) to districts; and maintenance of public order (traffic control, public education, mediation of disputes, etc.) to neighborhoods. Similar divisions have been successfully applied to recreation, transportation, social services, health services, judicial administra-

tion, and education, with benefits not only from the production of public goods but the elimination of public bads.[60]

Not surprisingly, "This devolution of power to neighborhoods is also generally resisted by the bureaucracy. Reasons for bureaucratic resistance involve the disruption of established routines and opposition to relinquishing their exclusive control of service delivery." It also includes a fear of diseconomies of small scale.[61]

Creating Public Space

Keil describes two central concepts of governance: ". . . governance . . . from a perspective of maintaining status quo power relationships while allowing for the greatest possible shift in the direction of where they believe lies greater efficiency, more decisiveness, less red tape and more market-like processes"; and ". . . notions of democratization, participation and civil-society-based forms of regulating our daily urban affairs."[62]

Thus the strongest arguments in favor of a lower tier of directly democratic neighborhood government, and the small scale it demands, relate not only to the economic benefits of public enterprise, but also to the political utility of "public space" that enables political participation.

Political life in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century reveals an extraordinary degree of citizen-alienation from institutions of government. We have privatized concerns that were once thought to be matters of citizen discourse and decision-making. As individuals, we no longer have opportunities to play meaningful roles in decisions of governance, which are reserved to distant and seemingly dehumanized bureaucracies. The frustration of human potential by denial of power has become a familiar theme.

This alienation originates in our lack of rights, roles, and resources to act effectively in politics and the economy. The result is a decay of the ideas that once united us as a people. The old beliefs are no longer reinforced by the outcomes they are supposed to influence. Behavior has become divested of values, moral purpose, and communal goals, leading to public malaise and obsession with material possessions. We see the evidence of this mass alienation in the *refusal* to vote and the drive for *personal* physique, position, prestige, possessions, and power.

People with low to middle incomes who are disillusioned and want to take action, many of whom are enamored with reactionary politics, either find no way or are steered to powerless positions and roles. This is one of the debilitating consequences of *advisory* neighborhood councils, notwithstanding the inflated rhetoric, hyperbole, and cant used

to promote their formation. These councils do not cure the deficit in what was once called "political liberty," a more familiar expression for what political philosophers refer to as "public space"—the institutionalized rights, roles, and resources mentioned above.

For Jefferson and modern commentators, American independence created new political liberty but failed to institutionalize public space for its expression in action by the citizenry, except in periodic elections. Although the Constitution granted all power to the citizenry, it withheld opportunities for *acting* as citizens. The hallmark of political liberty, discussion and decision-making *in* government, was closed to all but representatives. And advisory neighborhood councils do not change that fact.

Jefferson believed this lack of public space was a defect in the structure of the newly established state and would continue to threaten the nation's welfare. He understood public space to be both a preventative measure and an antidote to bureaucratic tyranny and endless cycles of insurgency and repression—of which we've had several in the recent history of our major cities. Jefferson believed that without public space as a permanent foundation for constructive citizen action, we would ". . . go on in the endless circle of oppression, rebellion, reformation; and repression, reformation, again; and so on forever."[63] For the heart of this problem is not poverty, as many would have it, but powerlessness—which is the key to overcoming not only poverty but oppression and injustice as well.

Jefferson also believed that the presence of directly democratic government within a polycentric system would ensure that "every man in the state will let his heart be torn out of his body sooner than let his power be wrested from him by a Caesar or Bonaparte."[64] After his retirement from public life, he advocated subdividing the counties into "little republics," patterned on New England town governments, virtually all of which were founded as directly democratic popular assemblies. And they continue today, nearly four centuries later, because their citizens overwhelmingly favor retaining them as such.

The need for public space has grown rather than diminished over the course of our history of urbanization. It's not difficult to understand how elected representatives are now recruited to serve powerful special interests, and how the representative system is thus transformed from a means of articulating the will of the demos to a method for subverting it. This subversion is driving a wave of political alienation. Reputable studies have confirmed for decades the commonsense conviction that voting and government policy are at best remotely related.[65] Millions of people understand that going to the polls is not a remedy for their endemic powerlessness, except possibly for school bond referendums and initiatives that limit taxes.

The massive scale of our urban governments is accompanied by the breakdown of political representation and the rise of centralized bureaucratic organizations. Consequently, we become alienated from public life, and the decline of our cities inevitably follows. We can reasonably expect in coming decades that, as metropolitan areas grow in population and conditions worsen for the majority, there will be more frequent and more extreme attempts to initiate or renew broadly based public life. Transforming those attempts into constructive action will depend mostly on envisioning the rights, roles, and resources that will empower the majority citizenry by institutionalizing directly democratic public space and public enterprise as the foundation of metropolitan government.

Fostering Public Enterprise

Economic laws and traditions in the U.S., grounded in capitalism, discourage governments from engaging in enterprise, which is normally considered the preserve of private, profit-making companies—a kind of "preferential option for the rich."[66] The production and distribution of private (i.e., divisible) goods and services in the capitalist economy are generally excluded from the scope of government activity. This is ironic because we trace our history from the English parishes that obtained income by brewing beer, renting pews, and other enterprise, and from the American colonies that were founded by commercial exploration companies. But there are other reasons for neighborhood governments to participate in enterprise within the context of polycentric public industry.

Public investment in social infrastructure—that is, in local organization and the cultural values and beliefs that sustain it—represents a form of collective capital. It ordinarily bestows unearned benefits on the owners of private capital, which are charged to the rest of us through taxation. The few possessors of substantial wealth enjoy extraordinary advantages from this arrangement, which is apparent when such investments are withheld and the infrastructure begins to decay or disappears altogether. As public investment in streets, schools, libraries, etc., declines, private enterprise and capital accumulation suffer shortages of human resources. The labor force decays, because training, education, and health care slacken, resulting in the loss of public services, from policing and maintenance of streets to mail service.

Public subsidies to private enterprise, via uncompensated investments[67] in social infrastructure, create lucrative incentives for more capital-inten-

sive technology and production. Yet there is an enduring viewpoint among radical economists that long-term development of our political economy requires at least a partial turning away from capital-intensive, socially wasteful industries.[68] Their great demands for capital, energy, and materials tend to restrict ownership and control to a small minority. They strain government fiscal capacity, generate unmanageable wastes and social pathologies, and leave idle large pools of labor. The alternative is for the public to directly reap a portion of the benefits of their investment in social infrastructure by engaging in local, less-capital-intensive enterprise, especially in the service economy.

There are unlimited opportunities for publicly sponsored, small-scale, labor-intensive enterprise, offering practical routes toward economic decentralization of the political economy.[69] Nothing in the U.S. Constitution prohibits the states from exercising proprietary rights of enterprise, and several, North Dakota most notably with its state banks, have done so. The states may grant proprietary rights to local governments through their chartering, by legislative enactment or initiative, or by constitutional amendment. State courts have even permitted municipalities to engage in commerce beyond their own city limits. Local governments in Michigan, for example, own and operate housing for the elderly in Florida. An early Ohio court decision allowed a city to operate a railroad across its own boundaries. Eminent domain represents another way in which governments may intervene in the private economy, as demonstrated in People of Puerto Rico v. Eastern Sugar Association (156 F. 2d 316, 1946). In that case, the U.S. Court of Appeals upheld the Puerto Rican legislature's use of eminent domain to break up large concentrations of land-holdings by sugar companies.

Attempts by cities in the nineteenth century to own and operate utilities were initially branded as "gas and water socialism." But thousands of cities now own utilities. And, more recently, in the wake of California's power industry chaos at the beginning of this century, in which only those cities with their own generators didn't face the threat of rolling blackouts, more than a dozen communities "have considered abandoning large investor-owned utilities" in favor of operating their own power plants.[70] An interesting facet of this development is the consideration given to "spot utilities," taking advantage of the latest noiseless generators that can economically and efficiently serve as few as a dozen homes.

However, given the continuing development of solar technology, a much more promising alternative exists in neighborhood-based solar power generation: Residents would save substantial money in electricity bills over time. As households withdraw from coal-based electric generation, reduced coal-burning would curtail asthma epidemics that coal dust often causes in low-income neighborhoods. The emission of CO_2 into the Earth's atmosphere would be reduced, easing the climate crisis. And the market and political power of the coal industry would be reduced, while the market and political power of the solar power industry would increase.[71]

Local governments run printing plants, phone systems, public baths, laundries, theaters, markets, and much more. Some own sports teams, and many others own cable TV systems. In the past, one of the directors of the Golden Gate Bridge District, the multi-county public authority that also operates a ferry fleet and bus system, recommended that the District purchase or construct its own oil refinery, to satisfy its needs and those of all other public transportation agencies in Northern California.

Once a local government is given proprietary authority, it may acquire an enterprise or other resources either by purchase or by eminent domain, although a public purpose must be served in both cases, and fair compensation made in the latter. The decentralization experiments of recent decades have tested and refined many such enterprises, including food cooperatives, daycare centers, community tool cribs, job exchanges, health clinics, ad infinitum.

Beyond service-enterprise, intermediate manufacturing-technologies, many of which are byproducts of international development efforts, make it less-capital-intensive workplaces practical. The application of these technologies by neighborhood organizations raises a hope for lessening the alienation of workers in the workplaces of industrial capitalism, an alienation that has not been relieved for low-wage workers in high-tech, online-retailing, building-maintenance, or fast-food industries.

Public sponsorship of enterprise, if by directly democratic neighborhood governments, presents the prospect of distant yet feasible opportunities for worker self-management, a remedy for workplace alienation. The potential for productive worker-controlled, directly democratic enterprise has been demonstrated repeatedly in the Basque region of Spain, in Israel, Yugoslavia, Chile, and elsewhere. One approach to integrating self-managed enterprise into neighborhood government is by adopting a two-chamber assembly, with popular participation in the lower chamber based on residence and in the upper chamber based on workplace.

The vesting of public powers in grassroots organizations serves over time to countervail corporate power. The union movement in its early life is an example of how long-range, bottom-up in-

vestment in social infrastructure can refine and consolidate new power, critically altering relations with the elites that monopolize private capital.

As more urban social communities emerge in the coming decades—primed for organizing by the downwardly spiraling conditions created by municipal government that has abandoned them and by the effects of mature industrial capitalism—a lower tier of directly democratic neighborhood government promises to be the most effective means for filling the infrastructural void.

Our alienation from decision-making power where we live and work, buy and sell, and where we're governed, creates a strong bias to directly democratic rather than representative neighborhood government. It is a brief for public space and self-managed enterprise. And in the absence of any economic law that predicts a better capital-to-output ratio by concentrating capital at fewer sites, decentralization also offers the possibility of greater total economic productivity.

Upper Tier Empowerment

Achieving a single, unified upper tier of urban government is more or less problematic depending on the congruence of city and county boundaries, and on the number of cities existing within the urban-municipal boundaries. For example, the incorporated cities of Culver City, Beverly Hills, West Hollywood, and Santa Monica are located within the boundaries of the City of Los Angeles.

The potential for creating a two-tier metropolitan federation in Los Angeles depends in part on imagining the ultimate future of existing special districts and general-purpose municipal governments. The list of possibilities is endless, and certainly none are predictable. It's possible that some may dissolve voluntarily, merge, or join with an emerging metropolitan government, but it's likely that many or most of these districts and small cities will continue to represent genuine if not symmetrical civil communities in the urban political-economy for the *foreseeable* future. Los Angeles in the future may be a "federation" government, with citywide and neighborhood tiers predominating, but for some time including many special districts and smaller cities.

When the county jurisdiction corresponds to the metropolitan area, the main tasks are to expand its authority and responsibility, and to transform its structure of executive and legislative offices. Many metropolitan areas, including San Francisco, have achieved this transformation by a consolidation of city and county. These objectives would seem to be all the more feasible if there is parallel develop-

ment of public powers in grassroots organizations, even on a modest scale.

Admittedly, the history of proposed city-county consolidations to create metropolitan governments has produced a disappointingly small number of successful ballot measures aimed to achieve such reorganizations.[72] As Hamilton explains, "Proponents of reform are often not effective at mobilizing community support because [1] they are not representative of all segments of the population, [2] the benefits they espouse are too abstract or long-range to interest most voters, and [3] there is generally a lack of political or grassroots organizations actively supporting the reorganization."[73]

Nevertheless, it's not unreasonable to imagine that, with the establishment of directly democratic neighborhood governments with limited grants of public powers, the citizenry may evolve a different perspective on initiatives to bring about consolidated metropolitan government, since their previous alienation from the public powers would no longer automatically stimulate distrust of all government.

Hamilton and most other scholars of metropolitan government regard the two-tier approach as *not* a viable alternative."[74] The examples cited invariably describe a lower tier of municipalities or districts governed by councils of representatives, most of which can be fairly regarded as bureaucratized polities in their own right. Their representative form precludes directly democratic exercise of public powers by the citizenry. Implicit in virtually all of the contemporary writing on metropolitan government is the idea that the citizenry is incompetent to govern itself through direct exercise of public powers, so unfortunately that possibility is never considered.

Electoral Options

The pivotal issue in the development of an upper tier is the structure of elective offices, and there are several options worth considering. Metropolitan officials may be chosen by neighborhood governments and hold their upper-tier incumbency ex officio. Or they may be elected from neighborhood government jurisdictions. Either way, the legislative body of the metropolitan government would be an assembly with several hundred representatives. Another option is for upper-tier officials to be directly elected from larger districts, comprising multiple neighborhood jurisdictions. Or they may be elected at-large, representing the entire city.

There are significant disadvantages in constituting metropolitan governments as federations of neighborhood representatives, either ex officio or directly elected from the neighborhoods, or electing upper tier officials at large. The risk is concentrating disproportionate attention on either neigh-

borhood or metropolitan concerns. There is the possibility of a metropolitan assembly of neighborhood representatives bogged down in ceaseless conflict, pursuing narrow interests without let-up, and ignoring larger geo-political or economic issues. On the other hand, the dangers of at-large elections for metropolitan government include costly campaigns that entail severe financial burdens and restrict elective office to a select few, thus undermining the voting power of minority and low-income constituencies.

There is an at-large electoral system that ensures representation of multiple constituencies exactly in proportion to their voting strength.[75] This "proportional representation" is somewhat complex in operation and has not gained public support in the U.S., although it has done so in Europe.[76] Such a system would require the introduction of partisan political parties into local government elections. The parties would win seats in the metropolitan legislative assembly in proportion to their share of the popular vote.[77] However, this system runs counter to the virtually universal nonpartisan tradition of American local government and is very unlikely to be widely adopted.

Electoral districting of the upper tier in metropolitan government on the scale of existing municipal councilmanic districts with constituencies of 50,000 to 500,000 may be the most feasible and desirable upper-tier structure of elective offices. Because it reflects the interests of current elected city council representatives and their constituencies, it is more likely to be adopted. And given the choice between at-large representation that favors "metropolitanism" and neighborhood representation that favors "localism," it offers a means for building district-wide alliances and resolving intergovernmental conflicts.

The successes of neighborhood and metropolitan governments in meeting the challenges of urban governance, insofar as they are organized and begin to operate in coming decades as compound structures, will reflect their ability to work cooperatively. The two tiers of government must have institutionalized communication channels and decision-rules that are integrated in a system of mutual understandings and that are positively sanctioned by state laws, formal contracts, and other covenants that define their respective domains and terms of interaction. One of the most important issues is how fiscal resources are to be divided between the variously sized governments.

Fiscal Considerations

Acquiring fiscal resources for their own jurisdictions is the ongoing task of responsible public officials. The problem is that the tax base varies unevenly across jurisdictional boundaries. This results in "cutthroat intergovernmental competition" to internalize (take in) resources and to externalize (throw out) problems and costs, through boundary changes, legislative mandates, or other means.[78] Economic activities invariably spill over political boundaries, with people living, working, playing, earning, and spending in different government jurisdictions. The net effect is a persistent mismatch between needs and resources.

The challenge in distributing resources is defining and assigning the costs and benefits of fiscal flows, which are the underpinnings of equalization strategies. The task when assigning costs and benefits is to prevent exploitation of or windfalls to any governmental unit and its segment of the metropolitan citizenry. The most promising structure for this purpose is a polycentric system in which political-economic empowerment is gained through variously sized public organizations that can effectively manage their externalities.

The bad news is that "local" officials in large cities and urban counties, managers of bureaucratic public monopolies, oppose in every way possible the formation of new, competing, independent centers of public power within their jurisdictions. In response to the Carter Administration proposal to give neighborhoods "equal standing" with other governments for direct federal funding, the U.S. Conference of Mayors branded the plan as a threat to "progress and harmony" in the cities—and nothing has changed since then.

The good news is that while the urban tax base may in places be insufficient for neighborhoods to become full service providers, prospects are good for gap-filling roles in producing and distributing goods and services. The potential for service divisibility, accumulation of resources through enterprise, and fiscal equalization strategies has been demonstrated in the urban development and decentralization experiments of the last five decades.

Fiscal Equalization Strategies

There are two promising strategies for equalizing fiscal resources, apart from shifting the regulatory, program, or service functions of municipal government to higher levels, as with the transfer of city hospitals to the county. Equalization may be achieved by delivering services in neighborhoods but transferring upwards the responsibility for taxing and financing. Financing of public education in California has moved a long way in that direction.

Federal and state financing takes many forms, and several of them could be aimed to fund neighborhood governments. Former U.S. Senator Mark Hatfield (R-Oregon, d. 2011) introduced legislation to fund neighborhood governments by way of a

Federal income tax credit.[79] Presumably it failed to pass for lack of an organized constituency. The individual taxpayer would have received a dollar-for-dollar credit against Federal income tax for taxes or fees paid to neighborhood governments. A similar plan was proposed in California in the form of an income tax levied by neighborhood governments that would be deductible from state income tax.[80] State sales taxes could be rebated to neighborhood governments for state improvement programs. And financial assistance might be given to individuals with vouchers that could be cashed only by neighborhood governments.

Another way of equalizing resources among competing urban governments is tax-base-growth-sharing, a plan to share future growth of the urban tax base. State enabling legislation for this approach was adopted by Minnesota in 1971.[81] The plan there takes 40 percent of the annual increase in non-residential property tax assessments within a region, pools those resources at the metropolitan (sometimes the county) level, and then redistributes them back to all contributing jurisdictions on a formula tied directly to population and inversely to current per capita assessed valuations in each area.

Although not equalization strategies per se, among the least recognized possibilities for fiscal empowerment of neighborhood governments are locally generated resources. The resource base for urban governments can be considerably expanded by neighborhood sponsorship of public enterprise and by effective control of public bads.

Going Backward or Forward

Secession is not the solution for what ails us. It's a backward step based on a discredited nineteenth century theory and practice of local government. Instead of one unresponsive bureaucratic government, we'll have two—or three or four. Instead of the clear advantages of near-metropolitan boundaries, we'll have fragmented and economically dysfunctional jurisdictions that correspond to councilmanic districts within our cities. Nor should we allow ourselves to be misled by the claims of municipal reformers who would reduce urban governance to a unitary metropolitan government or public choice theorists who would endlessly multiply urban representative municipalities.

The probable outcome of secession, municipal reform, or public choice restructuring urban governance would be more alienation and discouragement among low- to middle-income citizens. How long after afterwards—imagine a successful secession initiative, the advent of unitary metropolitan government, or the incorporation of many new representative municipalities within the urban area—should we imagine it will take before most citizens realize that little or nothing has changed? We expect that services will not be better, regulatory activity not fairer, opportunities for grassroots communal enterprise not greater, and political and bureaucratic decision-making not more accessible. The probable ironic outcome of these initiatives to transform urban governance is that the citizens, having had their expectations disappointed, will be more alienated from their "local government."

What makes such a result particularly outrageous is that these proposals for dramatically altering the institutions of urban governance represent neither grassroots initiatives nor interests. We have top-down sponsored academics and professional urban planners, political opportunists, self-serving entrepreneurs, and self-promoting media, in campaigns that represent special interests, pluralities, and elites. They all promise "economy and efficiency" and "more community control," which mostly turn out to be public relations gambits.

What we don't have in any this is a movement of the people, by the people, and for the people.

If the citizens of our urban areas decide to move forward and take governance into their own hands, hopefully they will begin with a vision of two-tier, directly democratic metropolitan government, one in which their hands are holding the handles of public powers in their own neighborhoods.

What are the prospects for this vision of citizen empowerment? Admittedly they are few and far between at present. There is no organized constituency for institutionalized citizen empowerment and it's not in the interests of constituencies that are organized. But we imagine—watching the conditions of urban life become more punishing, and as our dissatisfaction with state and federal initiatives and municipal governance intensifies—that a social movement may yet emerge and eventually become organized to vest permanent public powers directly in the majority citizenry.[82]

The authors are Co-Directors of Gather the People (www.gatherthepeople.org), which provides resources for congregational and community organizing and development. ben Asher has organized for ACORN, Citizens Action League of California, and one of the PICO projects (OCCCO); he was Assistant Director for Organize Training Center; and he has taught sociology and social work at several universities. Bat Sarah has organized for the North County Community Project and the Marin Congregational Organizing Project.447

1 Since originally published in *Social Policy*, this article has been revised and updated as of 7/2/20.

2 Julie-Anne Boudreau and Roger Keil, "Seceding from Responsibility? Secession Movements in Los Angeles," *Urban Studies*, 38(10):1701-1731 (2001), note that, "Los Angeles is usually referred to as a place of spatial fragmentation, societal dysfunctionality and political disjuncture" (p. 1701).

3 Boudreau and Keil ". . . make the case that secessionism in Los Angeles is mostly a class-based, and strongly racialised, movement of *social* separation couched in *political* terms" (p. 1702).

4 See Peter Dreier et al., *Place Matters: Metropolitics for the twenty-first century*, Second Edition (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), p. 59, quoted by Michan Andrew Connor in "Metropolitan Secession and the Space of Color-Blind Racism in Atlanta," *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 37(4):436-61 (October 2015), p. 436. The Atlanta, Georgia area provides a case study of racially based political motivations for secession initiatives. In the abstract for his article, Connor writes: "The Reverend Joseph Lowery and the Georgia Legislative Black Caucus sponsored a 2011 voting rights lawsuit, *Lowery v. Deal*, which demanded the disincorporation of several majority-white cities in Georgia's Fulton and DeKalb Counties and preemption against attempts by affluent and majority-white north Fulton to secede from the rest of the county. Secession would have severe consequences for racial equity in the metropolitan area." For a more recent example of this phenomenon in Louisiana, see Rick Rojas, "Suburbanites in Louisiana Vote to Create a New City of Their Own," *New York Times* (October 13, 2019).

5 According to Boudreau and Keil, "Annexation has been the name of the game in Los Angeles and the current secessionist movement [ca. 2000] can be seen as both a reaction to the contradictions created by this historical trend and a departure from its practices in that it introduces an alternative mode of local governance" (p. 1704).

6 See Kevin Roderick, *The San Fernando Valley: America's Suburb* (Los Angeles Times Books, 2001), pp. 62-63; and Gary Lee Moore, Annexation Map, City of Los Angeles (2008) [naviagatela.lacity.org/common/mapgallery/pdf/annex34x44.pdf].

7 See Alexis de Tocqueville, "What Type of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear," Chapter 6 in *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition*, Vol. 4 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010).

8 For an extensive treatment of the limitations of highly centralized bureaucracies and the advantages of polycentricity, see Elinor Ostrom, "Polycentricity, Complexity, and the Commons," *The Good Society*, 9(2):37-41 (1999).

9 See Vincent Ostrom and Elinor Ostrom, "Public Choice: A Different Approach to the Study of Public Administration," *Public Administration Review*, 31(2):203-216 (March-April 1971), p. 210.

10 Urban redevelopment gives neighborhood residents vacuous opportunities to "participate in governance"—for example, by allowing them to apply for neighborhood improvement grants to upgrade programs and services, provided that they match city appropriations with their own in-kind contributions of materials and labor. See Allan D. Wallis, "Governance and the Civic Infrastructure of Metropolitan Regions," *National Civic Review* (Spring 1993), p. 134. Harm-reduction facilities, such as drug treatment centers, invariably get sited in low-income and working-class neighborhoods. Not surprisingly, they are typically opposed by neighborhood residents. Urban governments endeavor to diminish or override grassroots opposition by sponsoring neighborhood meetings that allow local residents to "express their concerns and where public officials are given the chance to justify the project" before carrying out their previously determined plans. See Daniel Kubler and Sonja Walti, "Drug Policy-Making in Metropolitan Areas: Urban Conflicts and Governance," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 25(1):35-54 (March 2001). p. 47.

11 In Kubler and Walti, the authors point out the contrast that exists within cities: "Cities are the focus of accumulation of capital and wealth. They are major poles of technological innovation and development, intellectual and cultural dynamism and cosmopolitan attraction. At the same time, they are places of physical and moral decay, unimaginable poverty, crime and disorder" (p. 35).

12 Grassroots "radical municipalism" has moved out of the shadows of socialist and occasionally revolutionary circles to the pages of *The New Yorker*. See Masha Gessen, "Barcelona's Experiment in Radical Democracy," *The New Yorker* (August 6, 2018), who reports that "Barcelona is the heart of a new global political phenomenon known as municipalism." The goal is ". . . to break the bounds of traditional party politics and challenge institutional polities as they currently exist. . . ." See also Hubert Heinelt and Daniel Kudler, eds., *Metropolitan Governance: Capacity, Democracy and the Dynamics of Place* (London: Routledge, 2005).

13 See Nick Devas, "Metropolitan Governance and Urban Poverty," *Public Administration and Development*, 25(4):351-361 (October 2005), who describes an ". . . inherent tension between 'scale' and 'voice' if local government is to meet the needs of the poor." He concludes that ". . . the tension between scale and voice may be best addressed by a two-tier or multi-tier structure involving both a very local level, with statutory rights and to share of resources, accessible and accountable to the poor, together with an upper-level, also democratically accountable, covering the whole metropolitan area." (Abstract)

14 See Damion Keith Blake, "Direct Democracy and the New Paradigm of Democratic Politics in Jamaica," *Social and Economic Studies*, 53(4):163-190 (December 2004), who dismisses the "Athenian model of unmediated direct democracy . . . [as] difficult if not impractical to institutionalize" (p. 165). Regarding the bias against the practicability of directly democratic elements of urban government, see also: Ian Budge, the Forward, *The New Challenge of Direct Democracy* (California: Polity Press, 1996); and Michael Saward, "Reconstructing Democracy: Current Thinking and New Directions," *Government and Opposition*, 36(4):559-581 (October 2001).

[15] See Roger Keil, "Governance Restructuring in Los Angeles and Toronto: Amalgamation and Secession?" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 24(4):758-781 (December 2000), p. 760.

[16] See Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956/1885).

[17] See Frank J. Goodnow, *Politics and Administration: A Study in Government* (New York & London: Macmillan, 1900).

[18] See Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968).

[19] For a positive review municipal reform based on case study, see Jane S. Dahlberg, *The New York Bureau of Municipal Research* (New York: New York University Press, 1966).

[20] See Samuel P. Hays, "The Politics of Reform in Municipal Government in the Progressive Era," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 55:157-166 (October 1964), quoted by John J. Harrigan and Ronald K. Vogel, *Political Change in the Metropolis*, Seventh Edition (New York-San Francisco-Boston: Longman, 2003), p. 85. For a contemporary study on the policy preferences of the wealthy in contrast to majority citizenry, see Benjamin I. Page, "Democracy and the Policy Preferences of Wealthy Americans," *Perspectives on Politics*, 11(1):51-73 (March 2013).

[21] See Craig M. Wheeland et al., "A Century of Municipal Reform in the United States, A Legacy of Success, adaptation, and the Impulse to Improve," *American Review of Public Administration*, 44(4):11S-28S [supplement pages] (July 1, 2014), in Abstract.

[22] For example, "Generations of Los Angeles leaders have fostered a corrupt political culture in the city, centered on real estate development." See Editorial, "The Englander indictment," *Los Angeles Times* (March 11, 2020); and for more on the extent of the corruption of city officials, see also, David Zahniser and Emily Alpert Reyes, "City Hall facing a crisis of trust," *Los Angeles Times* (April 2, 2020); David Zahniser, "L.A. City Councilman Jose Huizar charged in federal corruption probe," *Los Angeles Times* (June 23, 2020); Steve Lopez, "Arrest at City Hall. Ho-hum, say Angelenos," *Los Angeles Times* (June 23, 2020); and Michael Woo, "L.A. Needs New Corruption-Fighting Tools," *Los Angeles Times* (June 25, 2020).

[23] Generally, see Richard Fausset et al., "'It's the Human Way': Corruption Scandals Play Out in Big Cities Across the U.S." *New York Times* February 5, 2019).

[24] For example, see Emily Alpert Reyes and David Zahniser, "Harm to Housing Cited in Huizar Case," *Los Angeles Times* (June 26, 2020).

[25] Sheila R. Foster and Christian Iaione, "The City as a Commons," *Yale Law & Policy Review*, 34(2):281-349 (2016), focusing on ". . . the question of how cities govern or manage resources to which city inhabitants can lay claim to common goods, without privatizing them or exercising monopolistic public regulatory control over them" (p. 285), contend that, "As public officials relax local regulations and other rules to accommodate the preferences of powerful economic interests, the poor and socially vulnerable populations are being displaced by an urban development machine largely indifferent to creating cities that are both revitalized and inclusive" (p. 281).

[26] See Keil, p. 769.

[27] See Mike Maciag, "The Vanishing Voter," *Governing the States and Localities* (October 2014), pp. 56-57, in which he reports: "In 2001, an average of 26.6 percent of cities' voting-age population cast ballots, but less than 21 percent did so in 2011" (p. 56); and Alice Walton, "L.A. dismal voter turnout: 8.6% as ballot count continues," *Los Angeles Times* (March 4, 2015), in which she reports that in the 2015 municipal elections, ". . . turnout was 8.6% according to numbers from the City Clerk's office" (which did not include all absentee and provisional ballots).

[28] The general abandonment of interest and involvement of citizens in local government, as it has moved farther away from their access and control, becoming increasingly unaccountable to them, may explain the numerous failures of city-county consolidation ballot initiatives proposed by municipal reformers. For an early example, see M.R. Glass, "Metropolitan Reform in Allegheny County: the Local Failure of National Urban Reform Advocacy, 1920-1929," *Journal of Urban History,* 37(1):90-116 (2011).

[29] See Vincent Ostrom, *The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989).

[30] For a less than idealized view of municipal reform, see Robert L. Bish and Vincent Ostrom, *Understanding Urban Government: Metropolitan Reform Reconsidered* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1973).

[31] See Charles M. Tiebout, "A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures," *Journal of Political Economy*, 64(5):416-424 (October 1956).

[32] See Peter J. Boettke et al., "Polycentricity, Self-governance, and the Art & Science of Association," *Review of Austrian Economics*, 28:311-335 (2015).

[33] See Vincent Ostrom, *The Political Theory of a Compound Republic: Designing the American Experiment* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

[34] For a seminal work in this vein, see Robert L. Bish, *The Public Economy of Metropolitan Areas* (Chicago: Markham Publishing, 1971).

[35] See Elinor Ostrom and Vincent Ostrom, "The Quest for Meaning in Public Choice," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 63(1):105-147 (January 2004), especially their discussion of The Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) Framework, pp. 114-123.

[36] For a general survey, see Glen O. Robinson, *American Bureaucracy: Public Choice and Public Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

[37] For a review of the basic public choice assumptions regarding individual behavior in relation to the provision of public goods and services, see Vincent Ostrom and Elinor Ostrom, "Public Choice: A Different Approach to the Study of Public Administration," p. 205.

[38] See David K. Hamilton, *Governing Metropolitan Areas: Growth and Change in a Networked Age*, Second Edition (New York & London: Routledge, 2014), p. 205.

[39] It seems clear that the Lakewood variation of public choice contributed substantially to ". . . institutionalized racial and class exclusions and privileges" and that ". . . racial exclusion was a malignant, but undeniable, facet of the region's increasing suburbanization." See Michan Andrew Connor, "'Public Benefits from Public Choice': Producing Decentralization in Metropolitan Los Angeles, 1954-1973," *Journal of Urban History*, 39(1):79-100 (2013), pp. 83-84.

[40] See Hubert Heinelt and Daniel Kudler, eds., *Metropolitan Governance: Capacity, Democracy and the Dynamics of Place* (London: Routledge, 2005).

[41] For example, see Guy Gilbert and Pierre Picard, "Incentives and Optimal Size of Local Jurisdictions," *European Economic Review*, 40:19-41 (January 1996) and Vincent Ostrom and Elinor Ostrom, "Public Choice: A Different Approach to the Study of Public Administration," p. 206.

[42] Robert W. Wassmer, "Urban Devolution and Metropolitan Local Governance in California's Next Half Century of Growth," *California Policy Issues* (November 2002), p. 72.

[43] For example, see Jean-Marc Fontan et al., "Community Organizations and Local Governance in a Metropolitan Region," *Urban Affairs Review*, 12(8):115-123 (2008).

[44] In a little more than a dozen years, we have gone from Frank del Olmo's report, "L.A.'s Next [Police] Chief Should Listen to What the Community Wants," *Los Angeles Times* (April 14, 2002) to Ann Brenoff's, "Behind LA's Dramatic Decline in Gang Violence," *Huffington Post* (February 24, 2015) (accessed at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/24/gang-violence-decline_n_6656840.html)—which ascribes much of the success to "smarter," community-oriented policing.

[45] See Richard Winton, "Violent crime up 26% in Los Angeles, LAPD chief says," *Los Angeles Times* (January 14, 2015), although some estimates are as low as 20 percent.

[46] We project this possibility although we recognize that most ". . . top-down approaches [to achieving metropolitan or regional governance] are destined to be rejected or thwarted," because typically they originate with federal and state initiatives. See Allan D. Wallis, "Governance and the Civic Infrastructure of Metropolitan Regions," *National Civic Review* (Spring 1993), p. 130. However, Wallis recognizes that, "If neighborhood governments can be significantly and meaningfully enhanced, a serious—and hitherto effective—objection to regional governance may be defused" (p. 135). The political importance of this recognition is that it suggests the basis for an alliance between the proponents of metropolitan government and directly democratic neighborhood government, producing a new constituency to overcome reactionary opposition of municipal councils.

[47] For an example of the rare exception, see Masha Gessen, "Barcelona's Experiment in Radical Democracy," *The New Yorker* (August 6, 2018).

[48] See Debbie Bookchin, "Radical Municipalism: The Future We Deserve," ROAR, Issue #6 (July 21, 2017).

[49] See: Bertie Russell and Plan C, "Radical municipalism: demanding the future," openDemocracy (June 26, 2017); Aaron Vansintjan, "The promise of radical municipalism today," *Ecologist* (Symbiosis Research Collective, May 25, 2018); and Kate Shea Baird, "America needs a network of rebel cities to stand up to Trump," BComu Global (November 25, 2016).

[50] In Moshe ben Asher and Khulda bat Sarah, "Should We Revive Murray Bookchin? Can Anarchism Drive Community Organizing for Urban Decentralization and Direct Democracy?" *Social Policy* (forthcoming, Fall 2018).

[51] For an introduction to the "two-tier solution," see Bish and Ostrom, pp. 12-15.

[52] See Harrigan and Vogel, p. 273.

[53] For an example of how the foundations might be developing for this perspective on directly democratic public powers, see Harold Mcdougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

[54] See Harrigan and Vogel, p. 373

[55] See "Holding Ground: The Rebirth of Dudley Street," an award-winning documentary film (available on videocassette/DVD) about the community organizing and development that revitalized the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston (Ho-ho-kus, NJ: New Day Films, 1996).

[56] See Margaret Weir, "A Discussion of Investing in Democracy: Engaging Citizens in Collaborative Governance," *Review Symposium*, 8(2):595-598 (June 2010), who notes that these "collaborative" approaches, while initially promising, are less than effective and durable (p. 597) and raise ". . . basic political science questions about the role of power and conflict in setting the rules of the game" (p. 596).

[57] For example, see Hamilton, pp. 212-217.

[58] Ibid, p. 217

[59] See Elinor Ostrom et al., "Do We Really Want to Consolidate Urban Police Forces? A Reappraisal of Some Old Assertions," *Public Administration Review*, 33(5):423-432 (September-October 1973), which concludes: "(1) small

police departments can provide higher levels of service than larger departments, and (2) high degrees of specialization and professionalization are not required for effective police services. On the basis of this, we believe more serious attention should be paid to proposals for creating small jurisdictions within large cities to provide generalized patrol services while enhancing opportunities for community control. At the same time, a large-scale police jurisdiction in the same city may be needed to provide the more technical services which require specialization of personnel and equipment. Conceptualization [of] reform as *either total consolidation* or *total decentralization* may not lead to better police services in metropolitan areas. Conscious use of overlapping jurisdictions of varying sizes may be necessary to combine the advantages of both small and large scale" (p. 430).

[60] For a review of issues related to the *economic* viability of small-scale political institutions, surveys of "decentralization experiments," and the potential for neighborhood government to play an economically useful role in providing neighborhood-based health care service delivery, see Moshe ben Asher, "Vill Economics" (accessed at: http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/VILL_ECONOMICS.pdf)

[61] See Hamilton, p. 216.

[62] See Keil, p. 761.

[63] See Letter to Samuel Kercheval, June 12, 1816, in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. 12 (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), p. 9.

[64] See Letter to Joseph C. Cabell, February 2, 1816, in (Albert Ellery Bergh, ed.) *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. 14 (Washington, DC: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1907), pp. 421-23.

[65] For a relatively early example, see Robert R. Alford and Roger Friedland, "Political Participation and Public Policy," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1:429-479 (1975), p. 19.

[66] This is in contrast to the Catholic doctrine of a "preferential option for the poor," which ensures that, "In every economic, political, and social decision, a weighted concern must be given to the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable."

[67] That is, not offset by tax revenues from the corporate beneficiaries.

[68] For examples, see: Gar Alperovitz, "Notes Toward a Pluralist Commonwealth," *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 4:28-48 (June 1972); Fadhel Kaboub, "Elements of a Radical Counter-movement to Neoliberalism: Employment-led Development," *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 40:220-227 (Summer 2008); Andrew Cumbers and Robert McMaster, "Revisiting Public Ownership: Knowledge, Democracy, and Participation in Economic Decision Making," *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 44:358-73 (September 2012); and Sofa Gradin, "Radical Routes and Alternative Avenues: How Cooperatives Can Be Non-Capitalist," *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 47:141-58 (June 2015).

[69] For one promising approach, see Hubert Schmitz, "Collective Efficiency: Growth Path for Small-Scale Industry," *Journal of Development Studies*, 31(4):529-38 (April 1995).

[70] See Tina Borgatta, "After Energy Jolt, Cities Think Small," *Los Angeles Times* (May 26, 2002)

[71] Rabbi Arthur Waskow (office@theshalomcenter.org) proposed these advantages as a benefit of neighborhood-based cooperatives in his Shalom Center email broadcast, "From Solar Neighborhood Coops to a Sustainable Planet" (February 26, 2016).

[72] See Hamilton, pp. 129-130.

[73] Ibid, p. 130

[74] Ibid, p. 149

[75] Joseph F. Zimmerman argues for proportional representation in his article, "A 'Fair' Voting System for Local Governments," *National Civic Review*, 68:481-507 (October 1979). See also Rob Ritchie et al., "Reclaiming Democracy in the 21st century: Instant Runoffs, Proportional Representation, and Cumulative Voting," *Social Policy*, 31(2):35-42 (Winter 2000).

[76] See Karen Beckwith, "Comparative Research and Electoral Systems: Lessons from France and Italy," *Women and Politics*, 12(1):1-33 (1992).

[77] See Rob Ritchie and Steven Hill, "Proportional Representation—Are Winner-Take-All Elections Fair?" *Social Policy*, 26:25-37 (Summer 1996) and Andreas Ladner and Henry Milner, "Do voters turn out more under proportional than majoritarian systems? The evidence from Swiss communal elections," *Electoral Studies*, 18(2):235-50 (June 1999).

[78] See Allen D. Manvel, *Urban America and the Federal System* (Washington, DC: Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, 1969), p. 12 (accessed at: http://www.library.unt.edu/gpo/acir/Reports/information/m-47.pdf).

[79] In his statement to the U.S. Senate, related in the *Congressional Record*, 11:145 (October 1, 1973), Hatfield enumerated his reasons for introducing the legislation (S.2502)—to wit: "the central importance of liberating the individual person; the imperative to decentralize power, or conversely, the inherent dangers of political and economic centralization; the instinctual need for community and family being central to the health of any greater unit of organization—the city, county, State, Nation, or the world; the humanity and fallibility of public officials; and the requirement of government, if it is to be democratic, effective and responsive, to be rooted close to the people."

[80] This option was proposed by the Local Government Task Force convened by Ronald Reagan in support of government decentralization when he was governor of California. See Connor, p. 89.

[81] See Metropolitan Council, "Fiscal Disparities: Tax Base Sharing in the Metro Area" (n.d., accessed at: http://www.metrocouncil.org/Communities/Planning/Local-Planning-Assistance/Fiscal-Disparities.aspx).

[82] For a proposal to address institutionalized power-inequality by granting limited public powers to directly democratic neighborhood organizations, see Moshe ben Asher and Khulda bat Sarah, "Public Powers for the Commonweal: A Challenge to Faith-Based Organizing," *Social Policy*, 45(4):21-28 (Winter 2015).

Click [here](#) for more community and congregational development and organizing tools.

Help support the work of Gather the People with a tax-deductible donation by clicking [here](#)!