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A Borough System for Los Angeles

By Kevin Starr

Of late, it has begun to dawn on the citizens of Los Angeles that the Secessionist movement is for real. Followers of local politics have known this for some time; but few people follow local politics in Los Angeles.

Politically speaking, Los Angeles is a movie watched by a few. When things threaten to go seriously wrong, however, the theater does have a tendency to fill up. I believe that it is time for the theater to begin to fill, given the growing plausibility of the Secessionist movement.

Certainly, it has begun to dawn on you, hasn't it? After all the backstage maneuvering, which has gone on for years, the matter has been referred to the appropriate state commission, and soon, astonishingly, the citizens of Los Angeles will be asked to vote on the continuing, or non-continuing, identity of their city.

At first it was the San Fernando Valley we were talking about, but now it is Hollywood and Wilmington/San Pedro as well, and what comes next: an independent Westside?

Fortunately, secessionists and non-secessionists led by City Councilman Tom LaBonge have recently been arguing about who should get the Hollywood sign, should the Hollywood secessionists prevail, and Hollywood become a separate city. Far from being a trivial matter, this event, I believe, is at long last focusing widespread public attention on the fact that the secessionists have come as far as they have come over the past few years: come, that is, to the ballot.

The citizens of Los Angeles, in short, are beginning to wake up to the fact that the City of Angels might very well become the first world city voluntarily to deconstruct itself. Not Moscow, not Paris, not London, not Beijing, not Sydney, and certainly not New York -- no great world city is at this time in the process of pulling the plug on its history and identity.

Most of us instinctively believe that the secessionism will fail at the ballot box. The very idea of a great world city voluntarily deconstructing itself seems absurd. Don't count on it! With voter turn-outs becoming even more miniscule, secessionism could prevail in that those who are vigorously for it will show up to vote on election day.

But what if it fails, as I truly hope that it will? Is that the end of the story? Has the secessionist movement, which has come so far, nothing to teach us, nothing to suggest in the way of the future organization of the City of Los Angeles?

I, for one, believe that the very plausibility of the secessionist movement suggests that it is time to meet the legitimate concerns the secessionists have put before us -- namely, the need for more localism in our civic governance -- and to consider a borough system for Los Angeles modeled on that of New York City. Such a borough system, I believe, will at once localize governance, hence adhere to the persistent principle of subsidiarity -- which is to say, govern locally that which should be governed locally, and only move to the next level of government when you have

to.

A borough system, moreover, by reorganizing Los Angeles as a federation of limited autonomies, which is what boroughs are, would also maintain the essential unity, efficiency, and, of equal importance, social, psychological, cultural, historical, and -- of equal importance to all of these -- moral unity of the City of Angels.

A post-modernist era demands post-modernist solutions. Now, then, it is time to consider the evolution of a borough system for Los Angeles as a way of localizing the City of Angels by federating its districts. Otherwise, another post-modernist idea -- creative destruction -- might prevail and in so doing destroy Los Angeles now and forever.

As long ago as 1944, Mayor Fletcher Bowron was advancing the idea of a borough system as a way of balancing the city as a whole and the city as a mosaic of districts. The sheer efficiency of Los Angeles in the postwar era, however, soon rendered the notion of a borough system irrelevant. Modernism, after all -- and Los Angeles was at the time the most modern of modern American cities -- preferred large, generalized, almost abstract organizations of corporate and/or governmental power.

Witness the ascendancy in the private sector of General Motors, General Electric, General Mills, General Dynamics, General Foods and all the other General companies of the postwar era. Witness the weaving together of the nation through the Interstate Highway Act of 1957. Witness also, locally, the rise of the Los Angeles Police Department under Chief William Parker and the near-Vatican status of the Department of Water and Power in the same era. The fact is: Los Angeles was able to handle its postwar growth through an exercise of civic intervention based upon economies of scale. The bigger and more unified a governmental entity, the more efficient it seemed.

Into the 1960s, one Los Angeles government saw itself as serving one Los Angeles people who in turn were perceiving themselves as one homogenous group (Watts 1965 constituted a wake-up call to this particular notion), living in one place with a more or less one standardized lifestyle.

Today, by contrast, large entities, whether public or private, arouse immediate suspicion, if not outright hostility.

Our post-modernist sensibility prizes the non-standardized, the highly contextualized, the local. Far from embodying one sensibility, the Los Angeles of today embodies multiple states of consciousness in which each Los Angeleno assembles for himself or herself a civic identity out of unique factors of race, class, ethnicity, religion, language -- and neighborhood.

From this perspective, the Los Angeles of the 1950s seems like so much Wonder Bread: industrialized, standardized, middle-class, bleached of texture and true nutrition. Today, everyone is demanding an intensification of local value and context. On grocery store shelves Wonder Bread has given way to a vast variety of bread experiences; and the old-fashioned cup of coffee of the 1950s has become the exquisite array of coffee possibilities ordered up in LA Story.

For their own purposes -- mainly to create political opportunities for themselves -- the

secessionists have exploited this shift in sensibility from the general to the local, from the standard to the non-standard, from the citywide to the neighborhood-oriented, and made of it a campaign to deconstruct the very notion of Los Angeles itself. On the other hand, in assessing secessionism as a half-baked idea, one must concede that like most half-baked ideas, the secessionist movement, while irresponsible in its program to dismember the city, does contain within itself compelling elements of truth.

Times have changed. So then: rather than deconstruct Los Angeles through secessionism, which squanders the City of Angels, why not try a different strategy: the re-envisioning of Los Angeles as a federation of boroughs, each of them distinct and quasi-autonomous in a number of respects, yet comprising together one great city?

New York City did this in 1898 when it re-invented itself in a new charter as a unified metropolis of five boroughs by splitting Manhattan and the Bronx (the original New York City) into two boroughs and annexing the independent City of Brooklyn, the County of Queens, and Staten Island. Voters approved this notion of a Greater New York, as it was called, because the borough system fostered efficiencies in transportation (including the subway system then in progress), bridge and roadway management, water and sewage systems, and other civic services based upon economies of scale, while continuing to nurture local identities.

Even Brooklyn, the largest and most venerable of the boroughs, a distinguished city in its own right, gained in the trade-off. And something else was accomplished as well: the notion of metropolitan New York as the de facto capital of Anglo-America: a city of five boroughs that would dominate the finances, culture, and imagination of the American people for a good part of the twentieth century.

How might a borough system come to Los Angeles? And what would be the difference between such a borough system and the break-up of the city as being proposed by the secessionists? Wouldn't a borough system be just as reduplicative and wasteful as the secessionist alternative? And how would the neighborhood councils called for by the new charter fit into such a scheme?

First of all, we begin with the vision thing. We begin, that is, by envisioning Los Angeles as one city with multiple identities.

History is at once on our side. In their remarkable reference book Los Angeles A to Z: An Encyclopedia of the City and County, Leonard and Dale Pitt provide in their entry "Annexation and Consolidation' the best and briefest account I know of describing how the original city of 1781 became in its present format "a one-legged, east-facing turkey with feathers ruffled."

Just as Los Angeles multiplied itself exponentially through population booms, the Pitts tell us, so too did the city exponentially increase its size through annexation: from 28.01 square miles in 1781 to 89.61 square miles by 1910, to 363.92 square miles by 1920, to 465 square miles by 1970.

There was almost never a time, in other words, that Los Angeles was not either growing in population or expanding its land size or doing both.

The driving force behind such consolidation, especially in the twentieth century, was water and

land development. True, members of the oligarchy got rich in the process. But we must also remember that the voters specifically approved of most annexations and/or consolidations. As compromised as the process might have been (an omelet the size of Los Angeles involved the breaking of many eggs), it was not in the long run the anti-democratic conspiracy of popular report.

For whatever reasons and however manipulated they might have been, the majority of the voters of Los Angeles, together with the voters of those communities which were candidates for annexation, willed Los Angeles into being in its present 465 square mile format.

They envisioned Los Angeles, in other words, as a metropolis greater than the sum total of its parts, just as their counterparts in Greater New York had done in 1898. Had metropolitan Los Angeles been more developed in any one of its acquired parts -- had, for example, there been a Brooklyn to absorb instead of the orchards of Hollywood and the lima bean fields of the Westside -- something like a borough system most likely would have developed.

But what's a hundred years or so in the history of great cities? What New York did of necessity in 1898 -- envision itself, that is, as a federation of boroughs -- Los Angeles can now start doing.

Boroughizing Los Angeles begins with acknowledging that the City of Angels has become a complex interaction of even more complex parts -- but has not lost its civic identity. That identity, that wholeness, consists on a practical level of those things which can be done most efficiently by the City of Los Angeles as a whole: run a port or an airport, for example, provide water and electricity, police and fire protection, a main and branch library system, a central park and zoo.

Yet there are other civic functions and services -- schools and neighborhood zoning come immediately to mind, together with certain aspects of police and fire protection -- that function best when they function in direct response to local desires and conditions.

Paradoxically, there is already a model for such inter-activity in existence although it is so vast, so complex, so embattled that it is possessed of a certain invisibility or at the least suppressed identity. By this is meant the County of Los Angeles, which is already a federation of autonomous and/or quasi-autonomous borough-like entities.

From this perspective, the County of Los Angeles is a de facto metropolis, although it cannot name itself as such. Why is this? Because, unlike the City of Los Angeles, the County of Los Angeles has never been a city: has never, that is, been possessed of that civic identity that once conferred can never be taken away.

Again and again, the voters of Los Angeles County have rejected the obvious solution of establishing an elected chief executive for Los Angeles County -- a mayor of a newly declared metropolis -- and thereby bring tri-partite government to one of the largest governmental entities in the United States, which continues to be ruled as a legislative fiefdom.

New York City possessed sovereignty before the charter of 1898, even if the City of New York at the time consisted only of Manhattan and the Bronx.

Los Angeles has possessed such sovereignty since 1781, even if it was originally confined to a mere 28.01 square miles. That is why the City of Los Angeles can never be deconstructed back into the County, and why the County can never completely incorporate the City of Los Angeles or (if the secessionists have their way) its deconstructed parts.

Once this process of envisionment is underway, practical responses to the City of Los Angeles as a federation of boroughs can begin. Already, the sociological and cultural components of such borough-thinking are in place. Westside Los Angeles, after all, possesses a distinctly Upper Eastside and Upper Westside Manhattan flavor to it, as far as people, institutions, and attitudes are concerned.

Hollywood recalls lower Manhattan in its entertainment orientation and Bohemian raffishness. In its mid-American ambition and rectilinear grid, the San Fernando Valley reprises Queens. In its textured ethnicity and connection to a former and founding grandeur, East Los Angeles recalls Brooklyn. South Central evokes the Bronx; and San Pedro/Wilmington, in both its south end remoteness and maritime ambience, makes for a perfect Staten Island.

Gradually, across time -- in a process of bureaucratic evolution animated by a spirit of local service energized by the new charter -- the various boroughs of Los Angeles, whatever they are determined to be, can function in a more front-line manner as providers of municipal services. This process is already underway.

In time as well, the neighborhood councils authorized by the new charter can evolve in the direction of borough-wide governments responsible for doing locally on behalf of the greater city all those things which are best done in a local context under local control. Something resembling this sensibility is already present within the councilmanic system -- at least around election time!

There is no reason, then, to break up the City of Los Angeles in order to localize it. If New York represented developed entities flowing together to make a city, then Los Angeles can explore the model of a developed city re-localizing itself through the cultivation of a vision of Los Angeles as the sum total of parts demanding specific and distinct programs of service. A year after New Yorkers voted in the Greater New York borough system, the voters of the San Francisco Bay Area rejected a comparable plan of organization. That left the City of San Francisco curiously isolated from its urban and suburban hinterlands, to the detriment of all.

By keeping Los Angeles together through diversification, the City of Angels will not, like San Francisco, be confined to its almost claustrophobic historic core: a Monte Carlo in good times, true, but in bad times the dumping ground for all those urban problems and problematic urban peoples whom the secessionists wish to leave behind.

Former Supervisor Ed Edelman, a member of the appointed Charter Commission, has informed me that his commission originally came out in favor of a borough system as it reworked the City Charter, but that the idea got lost in the political no-man's-land that existed, unfortunately, between Mayor Riordan and the City Council.

In place of true borough government, neighborhood councils were authorized. Interestingly enough, the charter of 1925, so Ed Edelman informs us, allowed any of the cities newly annexed

into the city of Los Angeles to have a borough form of government, if they chose to do so. None of the annexed cities chose to do so, but that was more than 77 years ago. Times have changed.

hood councils, however, have had trouble getting started because they do not represent a true mode of government, as a borough government would. At its worst, the neighborhood council system participates in the genre of government as therapy, or quasi-government as a training ground for political activists who may, indeed, develop into skilled politicians.

But does anyone truly believe that a widespread network of voluntary neighborhood councils will grow up across Los Angeles in the near future as an effective answer to that sense of psychological and social dislocation which is at the core of the secessionist movement? If nothing is done about establishing a true borough system for Los Angeles, then we must be realistic and see what can be made of the neighborhood council system. Here is a possible scenario, based on the theory that if you have a lemon, make lemonade.

neighborhood councils authorized by the new charter, it could be argued, can provide the building blocks of this new borough-oriented sensibility. Taken individually, of course, each council is too small to constitute a borough. Yet each council will establish a basic and indivisible unit of local reference for civic life.

In time, the councils will inevitably cluster cooperatively from region to region as individual councils seek to maximize their influence through association. Thus a borough system can be achieved from the ground up, rather than through a bureaucratic imposition from above, which the City Council would never willingly let happen anyway.

At some future time, federations of neighborhood councils will constitute boroughs, and these boroughs in turn, further federated, will constitute the essential unity of Los Angeles. The city itself, meanwhile, will have maintained its essential unity through adherence to the ancient and very wise principle of subsidiarity: of doing locally everything that should be done locally, and doing regionally everything that should be done regionally in the boroughs, and, finally, doing singularly only those things that Los Angeles as a unified city should be doing.

On the other hand, those few elected officials willing to come out against secessionism 7/8 and Mayor James Hahn has been most outspoken in his opposition -- could link their opposition to a counter-proposal regarding boroughs.

It is one thing to say, as Mayor Hahn is saying, please do not break Los Angeles up. It would be a stronger thing to say however: please do not break Los Angeles up, yet I feel the pain of those of you who wish to break it up, and I am offering the borough system as a true mode of governance to assuage your concerns, while at the same time maintaining the federated unity of the City of Angels.

Federation is a most powerful word. Federation, si! Deconstruction, no! Federation, in fact, can be seen as the primary mode of effective post-modernist governance. Part of the reason for this resides, I believe, in information theory and practice. The digital revolution has tended to make each person his or her own information base. Each of us, in fact, are becoming more autonomous because we are the stewards, through digital technology, of a personally tailored information system which is becoming, increasingly, the basis for our income as well.

In this audience, each of you will have a highly tailored information base at your disposal. It will include many similar things, but yet many different things as well. These information bases, moreover, are being continuously enhanced, upgraded, augmented, corrected, adjusted in a hundred different ways.

So, too, are companies in the private sector becoming, increasingly, not huge and encompassing bureaucracies but the orchestraters of short-term to mid-term even to long-term projects. Notice when you go to the movies how long the credits have become at the end of the film. Everybody, included to the caterer, gets a mention.

That is because almost everybody is a semi-autonomous worker managing his or her own job portfolio. When the film is over, the crew disbands and, acting individually, re-affiliates with a new film project. The studios, as such, remain very narrow focal and organizing points, not encompassing bureaucracies, with hordes of permanent employees as in the golden age of the studios.

The more cyber we became, however, the more localized we became as well. We did not, as initially feared, evolve into cyber jellyfish floating disassociatedly in a digital sea. The more we moved into cyberspace, the more we appreciated localism, context, the sheer sensuous texture of everyday life.

These developments -- autonomy, flexibility, localism -- have favored, as I say, the federation model in both the public and private sector. Why not do the same thing for Los Angeles, especially if such federation into a borough system will save the City from de-evolution?

Is Los Angeles worth saving as a city in its present circumstances? Obviously, the secessionists would say no. I disagree, and I hope the vast majority of Los Angeles voters -- should there be a good turnout -- will disagree when the matter comes to the ballot box.

Mayor Hahn obviously disagrees as well. I applaud him for that. I think that he must offer an alternative, namely, the borough system, to co-opt the secessionist movement.

Merely to get the idea of a borough system in circulation seems impossible, so unable -- or so it seems -- is Los Angeles to think about itself these days. The response of Los Angeles to the September 11 attacks in New York City, moreover, underscored a persistent ambivalence to urbanism itself that may help account for not only the secessionist movement itself, but the inability of the political establishment of the city to defend Los Angeles against it.

At the time of the attack, Los Angeles, the second largest city in the United States, had for some twenty years been pacing itself as the Big Orange in contention with the Big Apple. Hence when New Yorkers behaved so admirably during and after 9/11, trend setters and talking heads in Los Angeles fell silent or began, in various ways, to embark upon me-too-ism, including terrorist chic. Could or would Los Angelenos behave so well in such circumstances, they asked themselves: a question given double valence in that the image of Los Angeles in some form of catastrophic collapse -- whether by earthquake, fire, volcano, or extraterrestrial attack -- had been a fixed point of imaginative identity in the City of Angels since early into the last century?

And did Los Angelenos love their city as New Yorkers seem to love their city or, at the least,

take from New York an identity that was at once collective and individual? Here was a city, after all, Los Angeles in the very midst of wildfire secessionist movements in the San Fernando Valley, Hollywood, and San Pedro that at the very moment of the 9/11 attacks was in the process of making Los Angeles the first allegedly great world city voluntarily to disestablish itself perhaps in all human history.

Here also was an alleged city, Los Angeles, that had pulled the plug on its developing subway and light rail system, the very paradigm of the urbanism it allegedly desired, returning wholeheartedly to its suburban patterns of transportation, oblivious to the fact that by 2002 some 250,000 people would be riding the Red Line subway each weekday even in its truncated form, which was, in a way, testimony to the persistent urbanism that Los Angeles had suppressed.

As it had likewise been wrestling, pro and con, with its urban identity in the case of expanding Los Angeles International Airport. Built in the early 1960s, LAX had been designed to serve 40 million passengers a year, a volume that had risen to 67 million passengers a year by 2000. Becoming mayor in 1993, Richard Riordan had spent six years and $60 million in planning for the upgrading and expansion of LAX, the third busiest airport in the world, so that it could accommodate 89 million travelers a year by 2015.

The $12 billion Riordan plan involved a new terminal, 42 additional gates, a new road encircling the airport, and other expansions. It was a big-city proposal from a big-city kind of mayor. The neighborhoods adjacent to LAX, especially the highly suburbanized Westchester, an enclave of single-family bungalows, fought the Riordan proposals tooth and nail, cheek by jowl, in a classic contretemps between Los Angeles as world city and Los Angeles as suburban enclave.

In his campaign to replace Riordan, Mayor James Hahn, a suburban kind of guy from the suburban enclave of San Pedro near the harbor, promised to stop the LAX expansion. For Hahn, then, and for all who saw LAX as proof positive of the evils of globally oriented urbanization, 9/11 came as a kind of godsend, for it allowed them, in the name of security, to scrap the Riordan plan altogether and divert future LAX traffic to Ontario on the eastern side of Los Angeles County, to the John Wayne Airport in Irvine, or to the proposed airport at the El Toro Marine Base in Orange County, which the voters rejected in favor of a park in the March 2002 election, making that airport a moot point.

There was almost a ferocity, in fact, in the way that LAX was closed down in the immediate aftermath of the attack. Some of the imposed restrictions, of course, were being mandated by the federal government, but others -- the closing of adjacent parking lots, for example, the banning of traffic from the terminal roadway, forcing travelers to commute to the terminals by crowded and irregular buses from remote parking lots -- seemed at times as if the suburban side of the Los Angeles identity, its anti-urbanism, was finding psychic release in putting LAX and all that it stood for in its proper place.

Whatever New York City was -- gritty, uncomfortable, challenging -- it was not suburban. It was a city: one of the greatest cities, in fact, in human history, and it was behaving that way in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack, to both the admiration and the consternation of interpretive Los Angeles, a city whose biggest challenge, politically, was keeping itself together in the face of a secessionist movement that was based, ultimately, on the proposition that Los Angeles did not

exist in the first place: that it was an abstraction, an artificial construct, to be disassembled at will and not possessed of the spiritual or, indeed, physical attributes of a city.

There are those of us, however, who believe -- or who, at the least, hope -- that Los Angeles is every bit as much as city as is New York: a different kind of a city, perhaps, but one possessed of that same moral meaning that comes to a city when it has survived across time.

For better or for worse, Los Angeles is the contemporary gloss on American experience.

Los Angeles has deconstructed the constituent elements of American civilization -- in terms of money, power, race, law and order, housing, jobs, traffic, environmentalism -- and laid them open for all to see. No coherent civic center, no unified built environment, exists to subsume these forces the way that Manhattan, at least as perceived at cocktail time from Brooklyn Heights or the Rainbow Room atop Rockefeller Center, can subsume its agonies and contradictions.

Virtually every single block in this region contains its own naked drama, whether of glitz on the West side or grit in the environs of USC.

To try to wrap one's mind around Los Angeles is to try to wrap one's mind around America itself. Writing in the New Republic 63 years ago, in July 1927, Bruce Bliven called Los Angeles of the late 1920s "a social laboratory in excelsis.

It offers a melting pot in which the civilization of the future may be seen bubbling darkly up in a foreshadowing brew."

Should such a city -- with such an important American work in mind -- lose faith and deconstruct itself? I think not. Nor should we demonized the secessionists, however misguided.

So let's start talking about a borough system. Let's be local. Let's be responsive to context. But never let us forget that for more than 220 years there has been a city call Los Angeles which has earned its place in the roll call of great world cities and should not, so casually, be dismembered and rejected.

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