

▶ CHARTER REFORM

The Lure of Politics as Therapy

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SAN FRANCISCO

Why this rage to deconstruct Los Angeles? That still remains the question, despite the 4-10 decision last Monday by the elected charter-reform commission to reject the proposal to create 40 elected neighborhood councils with decision-making power.

The argument against such councils seems obvious. Does Los Angeles really need 280 more elected officials, together with the burdensome bureaucracy they would inevitably bring with them? Would not such a new level of government soon evolve into a Monty Python circus of obstructionism and political posturing in the governance of the city?

The deconstruction of Los Angeles—and that is exactly what these neighborhood councils would mean: the permanent fragmenting of the city—is not a marginal opinion. Indeed, the elected commission remains committed to the principle, voted last June. The debate is over what form it will take. The idea is also a deeply held conviction of many citizens. Just last week, for example, former ARCO Chairman Lodwick Cook came out in favor of disestablishing the city as a unified political entity.

Cook was talking in favor of San Fernando Valley secession. But the San Fernando Valley secessionist impulse is only one aspect of the deconstructionist drive. The proposal to create 40 elected neighborhood councils, each with seven members, goes even farther than the proposal to detach the San Fernando Valley from Los Angeles. It proposes, rather, the de facto deconstruction of the city into a loose federation of highly autonomous political units.

This is a startling idea, a revolutionary idea, a momentous idea: the voluntary deconstruction of the nation's second-largest city, one of the international crossroads of the planet, into localized units. Does anyone truly believe that hundreds of newly elected local officials, possessed of their own staffs and decision-making authority, would not at once become supreme in their own districts? Under such a system, Los Angeles might remain technically intact; it might even keep the San Fernando Valley; but it would become a federation of autonomies, not a unified city.

Is this a bad idea in a moral sense? Is it an intrinsically evil idea? Of course not. It may be an inefficient, ill-considered, idea; but it is not an immoral one, nor should it be demonized, even by those of us who feel that it is a self-evident absurdity.

The challenge, then, becomes to understand from whence the idea, however wrongheaded, springs. Certainly, across the entire First World, the deconstruction of previously existent political polities is underway. Yugoslavia and the Soviet

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Union are history. Scotland has achieved its own quasi-autonomous parliament, albeit without the authority to conduct foreign affairs. (Can Wales be far behind?) The Kingdom of Spain enters the new millennium as a federation of highly localized autonomies.

Here in California, the very survival of the state as a significant matrix of political identity is an open question. In the current gubernatorial election, for example, we have two highly qualified candidates, each an expert in state government. Yet, we are not asking them to talk much about such statewide issues as the water future, our embattled highway and public-works infrastructure, the growing state role in land-use planning, the reform of K-12 education, the need to renegotiate the master plan for higher education, patterns of local-state funding, or, if our current prosperity should continue, the allocation of future state surpluses. Each of our statewide candidates is capable of answering these questions; but voters' attention is not upon statewide issues. This is not the fault of the candidates. Having raised millions of dollars, the statewide candidates are entitled to try to win by addressing issues that press on the minds of the citizenry. These are, by and large, not California issues. It is as if Californians had already deconstructed California in their minds into, if not the proposed 40 units of Los Angeles, at least five or six substate regions.

Hence: It is not surprising, on one level, that this First World rage for deconstruction should come to Los Angeles. At least

Los Angeles, in contrast to the state of California, is close enough and relevant enough to its residents to offer an adequate object for political deconstruction. From this perspective, the secessionist and deconstructionist ideas dividing the elected charter-reform commission, to judge by the recent vote, are part of an international pattern.

More locally, the deconstruction of Los Angeles offers increased opportunities for multiple agendas. Aspiring politicians would have hundreds of new offices to seek. Aspiring staffers would have hun-

dreds of elected officials to look to for employment. Homeowners' associations would have many more elected bodies to dominate.

But even deeper than this agenda is the notion of political action as therapy, which is to say, of politics as an end in itself. The Founding Fathers adhered to the notion that government governs best that governs least. By and large, over the past two centuries, Americans have adhered to that notion. We have remained highly suspicious of multiple levels of government. Take, as an example, the notion of regional governments in California. From certain points of view, it sounds good; but no regional governments have been enacted in this state. Far from it, as in the case of the deconstructionist movement in Los Angeles, we are moving in the opposite direction, toward fragmentation, not consolidation.

The traditional notion of U.S. politics and government is that politics and government are not ends in themselves. They exist as instruments to do the necessary public business. While Ameri-

cans, deep down, still adhere to the notion of the American Republic as a transcendent moral community, we are somewhat loathe to talk about it, preferring instead to allow our republican emotions to surface at highly stylized events, such as reciting the Pledge of Allegiance before public ceremonies or singing the national anthem before sports games.

Today, in Sacramento, neither Republicans nor Democrats are talking about creating more government. The entire direction of the state, except for a growing number of political activists in Los Angeles, is toward the curtailment of bureaucracy and raw governmental power in favor of the enhancement of public-private partnerships and the encouragement of nongovernmental civic entrepreneurialism.

From this perspective, the notion of elected district councils represents the survival of a *retardaire*, 1960s-style concept of politics as therapy and occupational science. In the 1960s, millions of young Americans found in political action a way of creating community for themselves and celebrate a generational style. While political involvement had an ostensible goal, protesting the war in Vietnam, it was simultaneously an end in itself: a way of coping with stress, of finding meaning in the void, of giving purpose to one's life, of holding off the passage of time as the pages of the calendar turned and age 30 loomed on the horizon. Politics became healing. Politics became therapy.

Los Angeles in the 1990s, like America in the 1960s, can be a threatening place. This city has been placed by history on the cutting edge of the effort to find and forge a new American identity. That effort, moreover, is occurring most vigor-

ously and most successfully in the private sector. The revival of the California economy in significant measure is due to the entrepreneurial vision and practice of smaller, immigrant-owned companies. For such immigrants, politics as an end in itself, politics as healing and occupational therapy, would be an incomprehensible notion. They are just too busy building lives and making society and the economy work.

For the neighborhood-council activists, politics as occupational therapy is the only way to cope with the responsibilities of living and working in America's most challenging city. They seem to want it to be the 1960s all over again. True, the City of Angels needs reform, as the elected charter-reform commission is correctly realizing. But the government of Los Angeles is not a therapy center or a caregiver.

People needing politics as therapy have before them a wide array of political and special-interest groups. They are fully entitled to enter politics as advocates, lobbyists, opinion makers, opinion givers, even hardball political activists, if that is their choice. But they do not have the right to foist upon the rest of us the institutionalization of their need for therapeutic political activism. If they feel the terror of the night, if they feel the intimidating challenge of making Los Angeles work, then join the club. However, let them not in either their anxiety or their nostalgia clog local government with a needless new level of therapeutic politics and bureaucracy, especially in the name of democracy. Let them, rather, stack a half-dozen Peter, Paul and Mary CDs on their sound systems, and perhaps the hurt will go away. □