



YOU TOO CAN ORGANIZE A GOVERNMENT

By Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.*

The unembroidered truth, though unpleasant, is that a herd of Texas longhorns could be driven through the gap between our aspirations and our accomplishments as organizers. Our work has been aimed at winning “victories”—usually to fix a social problem or promote the interests of a particular constituency—but without an overarching vision, and over the long haul leaving things much as they always have been. Maybe the irony for our times, not without some humor, is the current backlash to the most visible goal of grassroots organizing, the ubiquitous stop sign. The *New York Times* recently reported that there is a growing national reaction “trying to put the brakes on stop signs.”

But it’s no joke that while we recognize the structural shortcomings of American society, our work has yet to reflect both a commitment and practical technology to achieve across-the-board progress for the whole country. Consider that, in comparison, the labor movement, over a period of several decades, produced major advances in income, health care, working conditions, family life, and a host of other dimensions in the lives of a large segment of the country’s working population. The shorthand expression for what happened is social development.

Stated most simply, social development acknowledges that what’s wrong with the country can’t be cured by changes in policy, whether executive, legislative, judicial, or administrative, although any or all of them may be necessary. Social development also assumes that given the structural nature of the society’s failures, cures cannot come

from politicians, bureaucrats, experts, or any other narrow class but instead must involve large numbers of ordinary citizens.

Development in industrialized societies means redistribution of political and economic resources, necessarily from the bottom up. But unlike both capitalist and socialist conceptions, social development does not give an economic interpretation to total social evolution. There is a preceding political priority, to institutionalize grassroots citizen action in the political economy.

Although there is no single accepted social development theory, we do have a body of cases, commentaries, and concepts that point to three possible strategies. These are (1) transfers of income by taxes, grants, subsidies, etc., or direct distribution of goods; (2) revolutionary transfers of assets, as in land reform and nationalization programs; and (3) long-term investment in human resources, specifically organizing social infrastructure.

We can make short work of the first two options. Transfer payments, as Piven and Cloward point out in *Regulating the Poor*, are actually exchanges that leave people more vulnerable and dependent than ever and, needless to say, have no effect on industrial capitalism’s externalized costs in pollution, unemployment, alienation, and the like. Revolutionary transfer of assets in industrialized countries is virtually never a successful strategy for development—usually unable to garner wide public support, typically undermined by the massive resources of the state, whether capitalist or

* Moshe ben Asher is Co-Director of Gather the People (<http://www.gatherthepeople.org>). This article was originally published in *The Organizer*, 9(1):25-37 (Summer 1981).

socialist, and regularly producing unacceptable political results.

Infrastructural Development

The third route to social development—one that many of us have worked for—is organizing infrastructure; that is, local organizations and their culture, to put power directly in the hands of large numbers of people. The assumption is that ordinary people everywhere share drastic limits on ways to take action as citizens. “Public space,” to borrow a metaphor from political philosophy, has contracted in this century. And the experience is essentially the same, whether in Eastern or Western Europe, the Soviet Union or the United States, or elsewhere in the industrialized world. Huge government and corporate institutions have eliminated rights, roles, and resources for people to act together at the grassroots for what they believe to be their common good. The rise of these bureaucratic behemoths is founded, literally, on the disappearance of what traditionally was called political liberty or freedom—not civil rights but the political right to a lifelong role in decisions on public business, particularly local matters.

Our main purpose must be organizing infrastructure from the bottom up, building permanent and powerful grassroots organizations, to bring about an incremental but nonetheless structural alteration of the state. But if organizing such infrastructure is the most promising way to social development, why has it achieved so little structural redistribution after so much investment? The problem, one that deserves far more thinking and talking about by organizers, is highlighted in the distinction between building power and contending for state power.

Contending For Public Powers

Building power involves organizing and mobilizing enough people to leverage concessions from targets. But contending for state power is using the power acquired through organization and mobilization to permanently get public powers, those reserved solely to the state or its agencies. These are the powers possessed, directly or indirectly, by the people “in power,” those with whom we are always fighting. We are continuously invested in building power but rarely if ever contending for state power. So too often our organizations invest their resources not in winning structural changes and long-lasting benefits but in survival, maintenance, and ephemeral victories.

We should be asking ourselves, what kind of organizational model can we replicate to institutionalize public powers at the grassroots? Then, how would such local organizations be inter-related, and how would they relate to larger established institutions? The answers are found, first, in contemporary urban political-economics; and second, in the long tradition and many worldwide

models of popular assembly—the commune, kibbutz, *landsgemeinde*, soviet, workplace council, and our own New England town meeting.

Government has to be the first choice for institutionalizing infrastructure, because there is no other way to vest public powers in the majority of citizens, guaranteeing their permanent and powerful direct action. The public powers—especially taxation, eminent domain, and sale of tax-free bonds—are also invaluable because of the economics of organizing infrastructure. The problem is that a complete program or physical facility, with enough capacity to serve the public, is always needed. Public organizations and structures cannot be divided into small units for individual consumption, like toothpaste in tubes, as are commodities in the private economy. There must be a complete Headstart program or fire department. Investments in infrastructure thus have a characteristic “lumpiness” or indivisibility, with slow gestation and payoff, and indirect returns—and they need public powers to succeed.

But forget romantic visions of transforming the bureaucratic state into small self-governing communities. We will not replace mass organizations with “village meetings.” The most relevant historical precursors for us are the popular assemblies that serve as anchors or bottom-most units in federal republics, as in Swiss cantons. That institutional arrangement is governance not by bureaucracy or town meeting but a “polycentric” structure. It is not inherently capitalist or socialist but has the potential for “public industry,” bottom-up infrastructural development combining the best of both. It offers a conception of adding small public organizations to the current mix of governments, to vitalize grassroots political action and economic enterprise in an arena of hard competition and bargaining.

But after saying all this, is it really possible for us to organize governments?

Special Districts

Throughout the country, in every state but one, it is possible to organize small, limited-purpose governments, called special districts. Often it can be done by petition from the bottom up. The districts are entirely authentic governments, legally responsible to territorially defined constituencies and possessing public powers. Apart from their small size, so well suited to neighborhoods, the chief difference between districts and other forms of local government is that their powers are received in limited grants. Their special purpose is not a rigid limitation though, since they get additional powers and functions through consolidation, transfer, cumulative grants, or the expression of “latent” powers—and so evolve *de facto* or *de jure* into multi-purpose governments. They do all the things we associate with government, accepting grants, subsidies, and subventions from other governments, initiating legal actions and relationships with other

public and private organizations, contracting for services, buying and selling property, owning and operating all types of equipment and facilities, investing funds, and employing staff.

It shouldn't be surprising to learn that about two-thirds of all governments in the U.S., numbering nearly 24,000 (not including school districts), are special districts. They have more than 300,000 people working for them and spend nearly \$10 billion a year. Their boundaries tend to be flexible, disregarding the jurisdictional lines of other governments. Most useful of their features is that they usually need not have a minimum population, assessed valuation, or area. Most interesting is that, contrary to the prevailing American ideology of keeping government out of productive enterprise, much of what special districts do is produce goods and services that are usually produced in the private economy. This includes running everything from airports, baseball teams, and cable TV systems, to hospitals and theaters.

On the debit side, only one of the two types of special districts has promise for grassroots empowerment. Dependent districts generally lack fiscal and administrative autonomy. They are extensions of other governments, usually counties. Only independent districts, those run by their own officers as autonomous governments, offer a route for acquiring public powers at the neighborhood level. But in many states current laws allow independent special districts only in unincorporated territory, where no city government exists. And unfortunately, most independent districts, wherever located, are run by a small number of directors, as called for in state statutes, rather than by a popular assembly or representative council.

There are three rationales for the existence of special district governments. First, there is the unresponsiveness of other local governments, apparent in their inability or unwillingness to provide public goods demanded by an identifiable community. The problem is often political in that there is no incentive for the city or county to meet the demands of a small, inconsequential number of voters. Second, there are often legal obstacles that prevent city and county governments from financing or operating certain services. Legislative and constitutional ceilings on taxes and indebtedness are examples. Third, special districts are created to ensure local autonomy, "home rule," although public power in most is held by narrow, barely disguised, profit making interests.

Shortcomings and Remedies

One source of confusion in thinking about the special district, as a means to gain public powers for grassroots organizations, is the gap between their past applications and their future possibilities. Their limitations are not congenital but reflect weaknesses that, once understood, can be remedied or accommodated.

The most frequent abuse of special districts has been by private developers of one stripe or another, usually to get credit subsidies for their profit-making corporations. In the field of housing, for instance, California real estate developers for decades organized special districts, many no larger than a single subdivision of new housing, to float tax-free general obligation bonds for financing capital costs. Many of these districts were formed with little more than the votes of their developers, some business cronies, relatives and friends—but the debts they incurred were binding on all who later bought into their subdivisions. Land promoters and developers were thus able to get risk capital without drawing on their own credit lines. Over the years there have been a number of variations on this theme, from water districts that primarily serve private agricultural interests at public expense to road districts that similarly make mining possible in formerly inaccessible areas.

The weaknesses and failures of special districts, as a class of government, are mainly the result of poor institutional design, blatant shortcomings in legal requirements for specifying communities to be served, and the necessary structures and processes of decision-making. Yet the districts can be ideal organizations in a polycentric system of urban government if two broad conditions are satisfied: they must be accountable to authentic small-scale communities; and the citizens must be unable—for fiscal, administrative, or political reasons—to get what they want from existing local governments. Sad to say, there aren't any organizing strategies guaranteed to cure their defects. The only sure bet is that local government officials will fight tooth and nail to prevent urban neighborhoods from getting public powers. On the other hand, when campaigns for public powers are won, state legislators probably will not seriously resist demands for directly democratic decision-making within the newly forming governments.

Approaches and Obstacles to Formation

State legislatures use several statutory approaches, singly and in combination to create special districts. These are general and special laws that authorize one or a number of functions. In the majority of states both general and special options are available.

When allowed by state law, an election to approve formation of a district usually begins by circulating a petition or by the legislative act of a local government. When petitions are the means, it must be determined who may sign, what percentage of registered voters or the population must sign, and the time requirements. Proponents must usually get signatures of between 10 and 20 percent of the registered voters within the proposed jurisdiction. The petitions to hold an election must be filed within a set period of time after getting the first signature—six months is not uncommon—and not more than a

month or two after the last signature. As with all other government elections, voter eligibility is established by the due process and equal protection guarantees of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. When a petition meets procedural requirements and is approved, an election is held, with a new government created if a majority of the voters concur.

The most serious obstacles to full and productive use of special district powers by grassroots organizations are officeholders in other local governments. City and county officials keep a tight rein on actual and potential competition from special districts for collecting revenues and delivering services. The districts are also opposed because they obstruct city and county plans for growth through annexation of unincorporated territory. Local government officials almost universally interpret formation of special districts as “unnecessary and wasteful.” In fact, of course, conflicts between local governments over boundaries, services, police powers, land use control, and the like, have almost nothing to do with efficiency and economy. The real issue is the gain or loss of competitive advantage, of potential tax base, fees, etc.

As things now stand, in almost a dozen states the petition for calling a special district election must be submitted first to a county, regional, or state agency for prior approval. These are so-called commissions “to control proliferation of local governments,” including special districts. A commission’s mandate may be very narrow, a simple check for “sufficiency,” or very broad, where authority may include ordering changes in the proposed functions and boundaries, or even summarily denying the formation. Commissioners in local formation agencies, when appointed *ex officio* by virtue of holding elected office in city or county government, have a virtual cartel: the decision to allow operation of an organizational competitor is then in the hands of confirmed monopolists.

The creation of government formation commissions, a trend that has probably peaked, demonstrates that in the Federal system the sovereignty of the states is fully recognized in matters of local government. There is no basic constitutional right to determine the form of local government. And local governments, as subdivisions or chartered creations of the states, never possess “organic” (self defined) powers but rather are completely under state control, within the limits of state constitutional constraints.

While the state legislatures may act at will—with or without the consent of the citizenry—in defining options for structuring local government, experience shows that state laws and formation commissions can successfully be challenged in the courts. State policy-making on organizational arrangements for local government is subject to Federal due process and equal protection guarantees.

One court, for instance, held unconstitutional a statute that redrew city boundaries to exclude Blacks. Formation commissions may also be challenged with grassroots actions. Such campaigns will certainly present special problems, given the relatively small constituencies involved. But because the commissions have been operating with little or no public visibility, unchallenged despite gross conflicts of interest, imaginative and well-focused organizing has good prospects, even (or maybe especially) in communities as small as a few thousand.

There are a number of other options for hurdling restrictive state laws and policies on granting public powers, all relying on local and statewide ballot initiatives, and each deserving much more consideration than is possible here. Because initiatives take precedence over lawmaking, they are a direct means to establish special districts or an indirect means to change procedures that restrict their establishment.

Powers and Functions

Special districts, like other governments, have three types of powers: those granted specifically, those necessarily implied by specific grants, and those that are absolutely essential. Specific grants of power to special districts are set out in state constitutions, government codes (state laws covering the establishment and operation of local governments), and particular laws, plus formation documents. An example is the specific grant of authority to operate a public utility, say a solar power-generating station. Essential powers here are to purchase property, hire workers, and do other things absolutely necessary to operate a plant. It is arguable that there is an implied power to manufacture solar panels.

Generally, when a special district is challenged for using a power that is neither specifically granted nor denied, courts test the reasonableness of that use by looking at its relationship to activities that have been specifically allowed. Thus a special district that is operating a solar utility can plausibly argue a claim of authority to manufacture and retrofit solar panels for individual residential users. The same is true for specific grants to operate neighborhood health services and many other public programs.

About two-thirds of the non-school districts have taxing power, but in more than half of these the authority to tax property is limited. Some special districts may not only tax and charge user fees, they can also compel purchase of their services. Property owners, for example, can be forced to pay an assessment for installation of sewer lines.

Not all special districts have eminent domain power, but it is frequently granted by government codes and special legislation. Property that is taken by eminent domain must be necessary for a public purpose and “fair compensation” must be made,

although public officials have instigated and the courts allowed too many exceptions. In addition to complete taking, lesser forms of condemnation include rights of access, easements, including those limiting a landowner's use, contracts, rights to enforce restrictive covenants, and leasehold interests.

Police power is the grant of authority to government to regulate, restrict, or prohibit personal or business activity, including use of property—without any compensation—to “protect the public health and safety, general welfare, and morality of the citizenry.” Like eminent domain, police power is not granted to every special district, but it is regularly given when reasonably related to a district's main activities.

Special districts conduct a wide range of public business, from abatement of weeds to water purification, storage, distribution, and sale. Only eight states limit them to a single function. But even with such formal limitations, implied powers may be very broadly defined. One state, for example, defines recreation to include any voluntary activity that adds to “the education entertainment, or physical, mental, cultural, or moral development of the individual or group attending, observing, or participating therein.” Utility districts, for example, ordinarily do anything necessary to provide their services, including constructing works or parts of works for supplying light, water, heat, transportation, telephone service, or other communications.

Income Sources

Revenue for special districts comes from property taxes, charges to users of their services, and transfers from other governments. For levying taxes districts often use assessments of value made by county and state agencies, with actual collection made by the counties. The fee for this service is usually something like one-half of one percent of all monies collected.

Borrowing by selling bonds is a major source of capital, sometimes requiring voter approval, sometimes not. When borrowing is for short periods, repayment may be from tax revenues or special assessments. Long-term borrowing may be repaid in two ways. General obligation bonds are sold and then repaid from the combined treasury of all revenues. Revenue bonds, sold to finance a particular project, say a neighborhood cable-TV installation, are repaid entirely from the project's income. The advantage of revenue bonds is that they may be sold even when a government has reached its legal debt limit. (Debt limits are also frequently circumvented by long-term leases with guaranteed purchase options at their conclusion.) Although local government bonds are sold mostly in large denominations, say \$5,000 to \$10,000, sales of bonds in the \$100 to \$500 range are not unheard of. One small municipality sold an entire \$529,000 issue in small denominations in less than a week.

Special districts also get revenues and other resources from state and Federal programs, but much less so than cities and counties. The districts were cut out of revenue sharing, the most important transfer program of the past decade. Yet Federal programs provide direct funding to districts for transportation, public housing, open space land acquisition, urban renewal, public works, medical facility construction, and recreation. The flow is likely to increase, in proportion to what other local governments get, insofar as special districts are transformed into multipurpose governments.

Potentials and Problems

The strategy of organizing special districts to get public powers, while yet largely unknown to grassroots interests and likely to be controversial with more exposure, is undoubtedly the most direct way to institutionalize citizen action. It should be understood, however, that winning public powers requires building power, a sustained organizing and mobilizing drive that springs from a strong, well-grounded community. Before any organizational model can empower by institutionalizing special legal rights, fiscal mechanisms, or legitimization, there must be a common history and development of related ideologies—shared experience of living and talking about life's meanings—that leads to an organized community with the capacity for effective political action.

There are a number of concerns raised by organizers, activists, and academics about the idea of using special districts to get public powers for grassroots organizations. Before outlining the main points and some responses, it may be helpful to quickly describe a situation in which organizing a special district is an alternative for a neighborhood organization.

Promising Applications

A possible candidate is an umbrella organization in Baltimore, in a district that has several dozen neighborhood and related groups, serving a residential area of about 50,000. There is an old shopping strip on a main six-lane thoroughfare; and in recent years, because of the newer shopping centers, the older retailers have been losing business. The result has been many business failures, unoccupied store fronts, fewer convenient neighborhood shopping places, and unchecked deterioration of the buildings as vacancies grow longer and longer. A big part of the problem is that the newer retail centers have great expanses of off-street, free parking, conveniently located around the shopping area. In contrast, parking in the older strip development, when it is to be found, requires parallel maneuvering, sometimes in heavy traffic, and watching a meter to avoid being ticketed.

It is apparent that one renewal plan worth considering would include building a combined parking structure and retail shopping center (given that

there is not enough adjacent property for ground level spaces). To explore that option would mean answering questions about how the structure could be financed, who would own, manage, and operate it, and who would reap whatever profits accrued? What organizational model would allow the community to leverage the necessary capital and keep neighborhood control?

Special districts have in fact been used for such purposes before, although doubtlessly not by grassroots interests. The formation process, while promising a long fight, is established. The community has to go to the state legislature and put in a bill to initiate the formation. It is likely that their legislative proposal would stipulate that the district could construct, own, manage, and operate the parking shopping structure, with financing initially by revenue bonds, repaid through minimal user fees. The proposal would also include limited taxing, eminent domain, and police powers.

The proposed decision-making arrangement would probably not be a corporate board of directors but instead correspond as nearly as possible to the governing body of the neighborhood organization or one of its member associations. Once the district is formed and operating successfully, the legislature may be asked to authorize a popular assembly, giving decision-making authority directly to all registered voters within the district's boundaries.

Since special districts have already built and run hospitals, power-generating utilities, libraries, and similar facilities, likely scenarios for their future use by democratically governed neighborhood organizations unquestionably include comparable labor-intensive activities that rely on paraprofessionals and middle level technology, such as neighborhood health care and solar power generation. Urban decentralization experiments confirm that upwards of 80 percent of all health care can be delivered in simple neighborhood clinics by allied health professionals under the indirect supervision of doctors located in central offices, realizing significant economies of small scale. Similarly, research and demonstration projects show that manufacturing and retrofitting of solar panels can achieve small-scale economies.

An exciting prospect for using special districts in the immediate future is "downlink" communications, that is, receiving satellite broadcasts of commercial-free TV and computer data through relatively low-cost antennas, receivers, and amplifiers. It is now economically practicable for a neighborhood to own it is own receiving and cable or microwave distribution system. Present costs, amortized, make such a plan at least as economically attractive as buying service from commercial cable operators. In many cities, organizing a special district to finance and operate a downlink system would enable grassroots capitalization and control.

Questions and Concerns

Given the power and potential of special districts, how do we know they will not be used for reactionary purposes if we promote them? The problem is that it is too late for that worry. The number of districts already set up and working against the public interest is sizable. We would do better asking whether it isn't about time for the public powers of special districts to be working for grassroots interests.

Grassroots organizations ought to oppose the formation of special districts by reactionary or profit-making interests but still support the basic idea of citizen access to public powers—and there is no contradiction in that. It is similar to our use of incorporation. There is an endless list of corporations that ignore the public interest, but no one is suggesting that we abolish the limited liability benefits of incorporation for political action and social service organizations.

But even if grassroots organizations can productively use special district powers, is it possible that one result will be a shift in responsibility for providing public services, so that an increasingly larger burden will fall on neighborhoods, and particularly on those most in need? The question taps into several "decentralization dilemmas."

There are a number of concerns about empowering small communities. The question is whether there is a conflict between equal treatment and social justice—equality versus equity—in the granting of public powers to neighborhood organizations. We can see the problem by imagining a city overlaid with such organizations. If resources are equally accessible to and divided among all of the jurisdictions, there may be equal treatment but without social justice for the special needs of low-income, ethnic, and non-white areas. There is also a concern that decentralization may be a smoke screen by some racially or ethnically exclusive neighborhoods, further blocking the already-stalled drive for integration. And there is a fear that "neighborhoodization" will simply lead to abandonment of the "have-nots" by the "haves."

It may be that when many grassroots organizations in an urban area have public powers, resources will be divided among neighborhoods more on an equality than equity formula, on a per capita rather than need basis. But since local government appropriations are far from equitable at present, except in state- and federally mandated programs, the loss is likely to be imperceptible. Also, where local reactionary tendencies threaten equity, there are some remedies in state and federal programs, and in their enforcement and regulatory activities. These protections are contracting now; but this is not the first, or will it be a permanent, era of reaction. And although public powers will not bring about any instant changes for victimized neighborhoods, gaining authentic state power—from which

they are acutely alienated at present—is hardly a setback.

There have also been predictions that, by granting public powers to neighborhood organizations, there will be more racial and ethnic isolation. It is a perspective that goes with the liberal and progressive ideology and rhetoric of integration for others at any cost. But there is another viewpoint from the bottom up. It is that virtually all but the lowest classes of whites share the “benefits” of the present system of urban government, to not only maintain their own protected enclaves but to fence in and rip off the ghettos as well. Looking at things this way, the idea of trading the rhetoric of integration for some institutionalized neighborhood power is anything but regrettable.

Equally un-compelling is the argument that with grants of public powers to neighborhood organizations citywide, areas with resources (tax base) will secede, leaving the rest to fend for themselves. This idea is based on a limited and unrealistic conception of urban government as completely centralized or decentralized, rather than polycentric. There is nothing to suggest, nor does common sense have one hope, that as grassroots organizations achieve public powers there will be an end to all higher levels of government—city, county, state, and federal. They will continue, and it is not possible to secede from their lawmaking authority, particularly their taxing, regulatory, and judicial powers.

Also overlooked is that, within the urban political-economy, the relationship of luxurious and impoverished neighborhoods is more like exploitation than charitable benevolence, barely camouflaged by local transfers from rich to poor. If they seceded, many or maybe most low-income neighborhoods could benefit, winning for themselves the right to manage their own development, even at great cost, without the permanent handicap of “civilizing exploitation” by powerful local interests. It is even truer when such areas have public powers and are eligible for direct inter-governmental subsidies, no longer hamstrung by city and county brokering of state and federal programs.

But there is a positive answer to predictions of more isolation from neighborhood empowerment. Unlike the present situation, in which bureaucratic governments deny public space to virtually everyone with a low or moderate income, public powers vested in neighborhood organizations would stimulate, as never before, real opportunities for self-interested cooperation between different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic communities. There are great pressures for formal and informal service and mutual aid agreements in such systems, for purchasing high-cost equipment, sharing technical staff, and much more. In the cities as they are, neighborhoods often meet only in destructive competition or conflict. While both are going to continue, granting public powers to grassroots organiza-

tions will lead to compelling incentives for cooperative joint ventures in the future.

The sleeper question on special districts is, will they add to the economic burden of families with low and moderate incomes, increasing their tax load, even if admittedly by their own choice? The answer is, “maybe, but . . .”

First of all, special districts need not rely only on taxes or user fees. One of their biggest advantages is that they have the resource leverage of public organizations. As mentioned before, districts have a better chance to attract investors because they can sell securities that pay tax-free interest. The districts are eligible for transfers from local, state, and federal governments for a variety of programs and services. And the districts bootstrap resources by using their other public powers. The Bay Area Rapid Transit District in Northern California, for instance, was able to get valuable equity in “property” for its stations, acquiring air space over city streets, thereby gaining at no cost what probably could not be purchased privately at any price.

The possibility of adding to the tax burden is also offset by a function of taxing power that is well understood by urban political-economists but hardly recognized by grassroots organizers. Much of the “apathy of the poor” toward neighborhood organizations results partly because, from the individual point of view, people are acting in their own self-interest. It is inescapable in producing what are called “public goods” (and “bads”). They are the products of government for which people have attractions and aversions, including material things and intangible benefits, from garbage collection to zoning decisions, all with benefits or costs. When citizens act in their immediate self-interest they do not join neighborhood organizations because, from where they stand as individuals, the neighborhood will enjoy the benefits of the public good whether or not they carry their fair share of the burden of costs. That is why government power to tax—to compel all citizens to carry their share for producing public goods or preventing and remedying public bads—is indispensable.

Moreover, to ignore the sanctioning purpose of taxation is to play into the hands of our traditional opponents, the city and county politicians and bureaucrats. They are always saying that neighborhoods should help themselves, should do for themselves what they are asking the city and county to do. But local officialdom does not dream of granting the necessary taxing and other public powers to neighborhoods, the very same powers the politicians and bureaucrats regard as absolutely essential to their own efforts at producing public goods.

The deepest motive for vesting taxing power in grassroots organizations is that it is the most promising way for large numbers of moderate- and low-income citizens to gain an authentic power lever—a

handle that cannot be resisted—on higher levels of government. Organized tax resistance for residence-place organizing, like the strike for work-place organizing, is the ultimate power lever. The hitch in using these levers, however, is that risks are great for those involved, whether resisting taxes or striking, and what is needed is organization that not only increases the potential of individual action but also reduces individual vulnerability. The final point here is that, before large numbers of organized citizens will use the tax resistance lever, there must be permanent and legitimate organization to offset the risks. It is unlikely that there is any better model for this purpose than the local jurisdiction with institutionalized taxing authority.

For the Future

If we are to achieve redistribution in this society, it will be necessary to forsake both revolutionary and electoral strategies in favor of long-range organizing of social infrastructure, sponsored from the bottom up. The main job is to create directly democratic public organizations, popular assemblies that give people space to act as citizens by granting them permanent roles through which they can exercise public powers. But these organizations are not

in themselves the answers to our problems, only the means to the answers when owned by communities that are well organized and mobilized for action.

We have in the U.S. a legal framework and historical political practice of organizing special districts, giving us access to a nearly ideal model for neighborhoods to gain public powers. Thousands of districts have already been established, far too many by the wrong people for the wrong reasons. Now it is our turn.

The way is not quick, simple, or easy—but given the systemic problems of this society it would be mindlessly wishful to imagine anything less than a decades-long movement to build public power at the grassroots. Just think, organizing local unions at the start was a criminal conspiracy. At least now we have embodied in culture and law a tradition of forming governments by petition, plus the right of initiative to upgrade state laws and constitutions. Finally, if the goal seems too far distant, remember the French colonial administrator who urged people to plant trees in a new city he was laying out. When told it would take 150 years before the trees would give any shade, he replied, “All the more reason to do it today!”

Related Reading

Arendt, Hannah, “The Revolutionary Tradition and Its Lost Treasure,” in *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963, 1965), pp. 217-85.

ben Asher, Moshe, *Social Infrastructure Organizing Technology* (Baltimore: University of Maryland, School of Social Work and Community Planning, 1980).

Berger, Peter L., *Pyramids of Sacrifice* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1976).

Caro, Robert A., “The Warp on the Loom,” in *The Power Broker, Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974, 1975), pp. 615-36.

Hawkins, Robert B., Jr., *Self-Government By District* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1976).

Hawkins, Robert B., Jr., “Special Districts and Urban Services,” in (Elinor Ostrom, ed.) *The Delivery of Urban Services, Outcomes of Change*, Vol. 10, Urban Affairs Annual Review (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1976), pp. 171-88.

Niskanen, William and Mickey Levy, *Cities and Schools: A Case for Community Government in California*, Working paper 14 (Berkeley: University of California, Graduate School of Public Policy, 1974).

Omer, Salima, “Social Development,” *International Social Work*, 22(3):11-26 (1979).

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

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