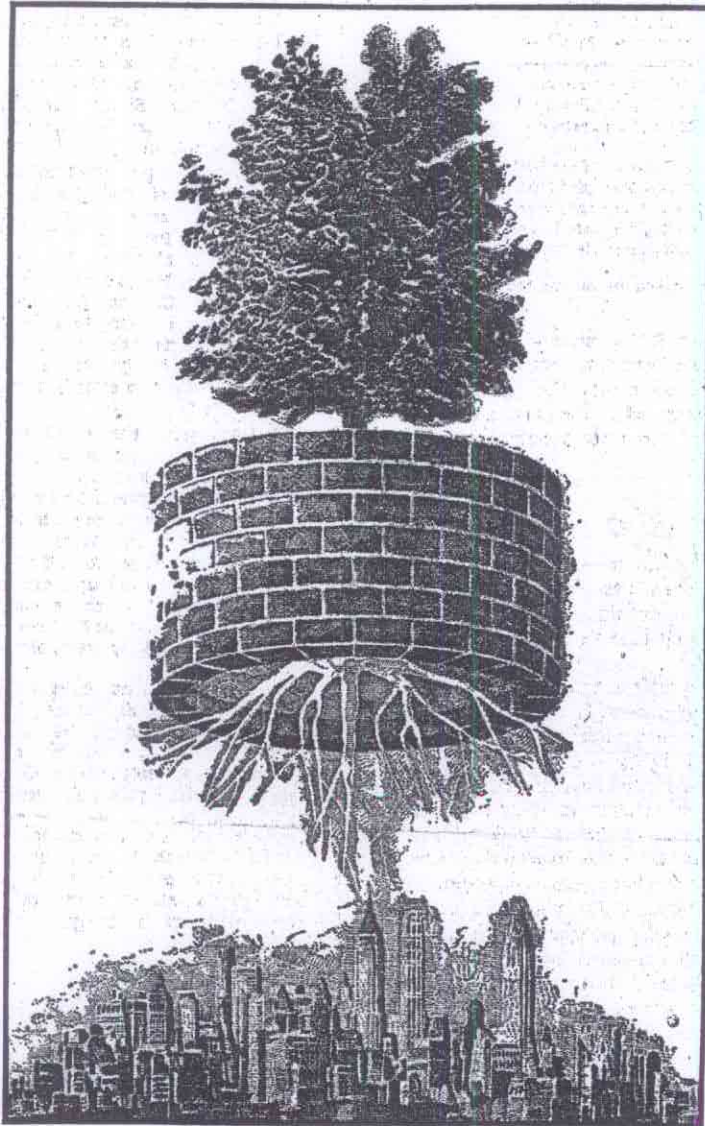


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THE NEW YORK TIMES, MONDAY, JANUARY 31, 1972

Breaking Up City Hall: I

Why Neighborhoods Must Secede



By KARL HESS

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WASHINGTON—The Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini warned us not to “imagine that you can free yourselves from unjust social condi-

tions before winning a country of your own. Do not be seduced by the idea of improving your material conditions without first solving the national questions.”

The Irish revolutionary James Connolly translated that into the independence of his people. Lenin, impressed by Connolly, used the idea to do his thing at home rather than globally. Barry Goldwater, when he was a revolutionary, used to talk about something similar when he spoke of independence and virtual nationhood for states, counties, even cities. Huey Newton talks about it still, seeing the liberation of his oppressed comrades in independent, decolonized communities.

Since all of the others are either retired from revolution or dead, Huey

Newton is the most vital. He also may be the most perceptive in seeing where, in this particular nation-state, a great energy for social change is to be found. That energy is in the neighborhoods.

To survive, the people in neighborhoods are going to have to secede.

In every large city, the problems of crime, of welfare, of health care, of education, have outpaced every ability of metropolitan planners and bureaucrats. There is no successful big city in this nation. And no amount of enlargement of the bureaucracies and spending in the cities has changed this. The alternative seems, clearly, to be toward decentralization.

Resources? The liberal myth that poor neighborhoods, for instance, receive more from Government than they could afford on their own has been sharply disputed in the first survey of such a neighborhood which does not fall for the standard swindle of giving the poor neighborhood its pro-rata share of such unwanted expenditures

as the Vietnam war or subsidies to big business and big politicians.

In one of the poorest welfare sections of Washington, D. C., the survey showed that the residents shell out at least \$40 million in taxes, licenses, etc., to all levels of government. They get back, in geographically located services and payments, about \$30 million, thus losing \$10 million to the rich, the powerful, the people who are supposed to be protecting them but who, instead, are simply fleecing them.

Civility? That resource is historically available. Neighborhoods in crisis throw up all manner of self-actuating groups to get jobs done. Some shrink in horror that one such group might be of vigilantes to crack down on street crime. Is the F.B.I. or the downtown police really more trustworthy, more accountable to the people themselves? Both institutions are, in fact, far less accountable than community-controlled police.

As for general governance, to the exact extent it is needed and only to that extent, the neighborhoods are ideally suited for government by assembly, for participatory democracy, for town-meeting government. The role of larger, regional or even continental government in a land of free, fraternal communities would be simply that of coordination or, while national interests persist in the world at large, the role would be one of representing the communities as a Federal emissary or, woefully, as a Federal coordinator of defense forces composed, on the Swiss or Chinese models, of local citizen soldiers based and rooted in the neighborhoods themselves.

Many who oppose decentralization

are haunted by a specter of resurgent plantationism in the South. But local power there certainly need not mean Klan power over everyone. Rather, localism could mean a chance for black communities to have the sort of local identity which can defend against depredations by making the black community something more than just a niggertown appended to the white establishment's turf. The rural patterns of the South are made to order for local power. Decentralization has been thwarted so far by white, rich landowners seeking to maintain their own hold on resources and control over populations.

But it is in the cities that the neighborhoods have been most abused. They have been gobbled up by the urban imperialism of downtown rentiers. They have been insulted as ethnic or racial while the downtown Wasps milked them dry for votes or zoning. And yet they persist—occupied by strange police, harassed by criminals who have more connections downtown than any of the victims, impoverished by absentee landlords and tax collectors, abandoned by megalopolitan hospitals and treated like Skinnerian mice by visiting school teachers.

They need not take it. They do not need it. They should rise. They should secede.

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