

Learning from L.A.

by David Halle

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The current gubernatorial recall election in California provides further ammunition for those who like to dismiss the West Coast, and especially Los Angeles, as offering little more than a comically surreal contrast to a real place like New York. But there are actually some striking similarities between America's two largest cities, and there are ways in which each can learn from the other's errors and innovations.

The most publicized example of New York's influence on Los Angeles is the hiring of William Bratton to be L.A. police commissioner in the hopes that he will repeat the success he and others had in fighting crime while he was police commissioner in New York. But the flow need not go in only one direction. There is plenty that New York can learn from Los Angeles.

MORE DEMOCRATIC "NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS"

The City of Los Angeles adopted a new charter in 2000 and during the four years of debate

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preceding adoption two New York modes of governance were considered. The strong mayoralty model was vehemently rejected. New York community boards, on the other hand, were accepted, though quietly and in a somewhat different form - a form that could be instructive to New York.

On the strong mayoralty, then-Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan wanted the ability to appoint and fire department heads without City Council approval in the same way as New York's commissioners serve at the mayor's pleasure. Opponents in Los Angeles heatedly resisted giving the mayor such powers, arguing that to do so would vastly increase the possibilities of what they termed "New York-style" political corruption and mayoral abuse of power.

On the other hand the new Los Angeles charter adopted, and largely copied, one of New York City's most fascinating innovations, community planning boards, which in the form introduced into Los Angeles were called "neighborhood councils." The impetus for introducing these neighborhood councils in Los Angeles was the powerful San Fernando Valley secession movement (similar to the 1993 Staten Island secession movement), which, had it succeeded, would have taken 36 percent of the population out of the city of Los Angeles to become the sixth-largest city in the US, comprised of about 1.35 million people. So the secession stakes were high. It was felt in Los Angeles that neighborhood councils, by promising some local autonomy to neighborhoods, would undercut secession, and New York's community boards were the only existing model for such an experiment in any large U.S. city.

In both cities, the neighborhood councils/community boards are strictly advisory. In Los Angeles it was felt, for example, that there would be no way of avoiding the "not-in-my-backyard" problem if neighborhood councils were given decision-making powers. (In a bold move, though, area planning commissions were created in Los Angeles that do have some land use powers.) But beyond that basic similarity, Los Angeles's neighborhood councils differ in two significant ways from New York's community boards, making them more democratic. In Los Angeles, needing to start from scratch with no pre-determined boundaries, it was left to the people from each neighborhood to determine the geographic boundaries of each council, in a process that included some basic specifications, but that gave a startling amount of decision-making power to the communities themselves.

A second difference from New York is that in Los Angeles the officers of the neighborhood council (once its geographic boundaries have been approved), are elected by the residents of the neighborhood. In New York, by contrast, the fifty members of each community board are appointed, half by the borough president, the rest by the city council members within whose district the board's boundaries fall.

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As the city of Los Angeles moves along with this experiment, it might be time for New York City to look more closely at its own experiment with [community boards](#) .

This closer look seems especially appropriate at a time when political parties, the main mechanism for citizen participation in the local political process, continue to lose effectiveness. Mayor Michael Bloomberg's proposal to introduce non-partisan elections in New York (a system that already exists in Los Angeles, by the way) may or may not succeed, but if it does succeed, it will leave community boards to play a greater role as links between ordinary citizens and political power.

AN ECONOMIC POLICY FAVORING SMALL BUSINESSES AND "MULTIPLE DOWNTOWNS"

On economic policy, a widely discussed study published recently by the Center for an Urban Future, urged New York City to follow the example of Los Angeles, and other cities such as Houston, which have acknowledged that in the last 20 years, a majority of jobs nationwide have been created by companies that employ fewer than 100 people. L.A. has encouraged the growth of small and medium sized businesses, often owned by minorities or immigrants, and successfully rebuilt its economy in this way. The report chided New York City for its "doomed strategy" of heavily subsidizing, via tax abatements and real estate abatements, a few large firms in select industries such as finance, insurance and real estate, in an attempt to prevent these firms from leaving the city for the suburbs. Such unfair subsidies drove up the price of real estate for small and medium sized businesses, and were also often ineffective in convincing the companies to stay. New York City was also urged to go beyond its traditional focus on Manhattan's midtown and downtown business districts, the first and third largest in the country respectively. Instead, the city should encourage multiple-downtowns fostering economic development in all five boroughs, for example in downtown Brooklyn, and in Flushing and Long Island City in Queens.

"Multiple-downtowns" sound like a version of the "edge cities" for which Los Angeles is famous, but modified for the needs of New York City. Edge cities, which have been developing over the last 30 years, challenge the traditional view that economic growth is concentrated in a central core downtown. Most urban regions are now made up of a multiplicity of edge cities (also known as "economic nodes") scattered around their entire geographic area. Formally, edge cities are defined as places that have substantial office and retail space, unlike the standard bedroom suburb. Some edge cities, especially in the Los Angeles region, are industrial districts. The New York region has many examples of edge cities (e.g. Melville and Hauppauge on Long Island and White Plains and Purchase in the rest of New York State, Woodbridge and Mahwah in New

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Jersey, and Stamford/Greenwich and Westport in Connecticut.) The obvious dilemma facing New York City as it moves to encourage economic growth in its outer boroughs is how to do this without seeing such development slide beyond the city borders.

Daniel Doctoroff, New York City's deputy mayor for economic development, said he agreed with most of the study and that the city was already implementing many of its recommendations, including cultivating business districts beyond midtown and downtown Manhattan.

LICENSE FOR IMMIGRANTS

New York City justly prides itself on its measures to guarantee services to immigrants regardless of their legal status, in sharp contrast to what is widely perceived as a deep anti-immigrant attitude in most of California. Nine years ago, for example, then-Governor Pete Wilson made support for Proposition 187, which excluded immigrants from receiving major social services, a major focus of his reelection campaign. However, on September 5 of this year, current Governor Gray Davis signed a bill allowing illegal immigrants to obtain California driver's licenses. This goes further than New York City, where residents whose immigration status is illegal cannot get driver's licenses.

The anti-immigrant movement in California has been undermined by California court decisions that invalidated most of Proposition 187, and by the passage of welfare reform on the federal level in 1996, which took some of the sting out of charges that immigrants were exploiting the welfare system. But it was demographics that pressured Davis to take a step to shore up his support. Latinos and Asians now comprise over a quarter of the state's population, the highest in the nation. It is no accident that the bill allowing California driver's licenses for illegal immigrants had been pushed since 1998 by a Democratic State Senator from the City of Los Angeles, Gil Cedillo. By 2000 the proportion of foreign born in the City of Los Angeles was 41 percent, which exceeds that in New York City (36 percent), the latter itself at its highest since 1910.

In short, this recall election signals that California's days as a bastion of anti-immigrant sentiment and legislation may be over, allowing for the emergence of the City of Los Angeles as an engine of pro-immigrant sentiment comparable to, and even in some respects outdoing, New York City. Defending his driver's license bill against those who said it was a security threat, Cedillo argued that the law would actually improve national security by placing on file at the Department of Motor Vehicles the fingerprints and home addresses of illegal immigrants. How long now before pressure mounts to allow illegal immigrants in New York to get driver's licenses too?

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CRIME AND POLICING

Crime fighting is an area where the City of Los Angeles has decided, correctly, that it has much to learn from New York. In 2002 when Los Angeles surpassed New York City in the annual number of murders despite having a population (3.7 million) less than half New York's, the Los Angeles media and many politicians began to refer to Los Angeles in shame as the "murder capital of America."

In November of that year the Los Angeles City Council confirmed former New York City Police Commissioner Bill Bratton as Mayor Richard Hahn's choice to head the Los Angeles Police Department. Fighting crime, Hahn said, was the single most important issue on which his mayoralty should be judged. He added that provided crime fell he did not care if Bratton became the most famous man in Los Angeles (a reference to Mayor Rudy Giuliani having fired Bratton for becoming too visible).

Over the last eleven months Bratton has been implementing in Los Angeles many of the tactics he and others successfully adopted in New York City.

Bratton has also introduced some measures less familiar to New Yorkers. Risking the wrath of homeowners, he said that 92 percent of burglar alarms in LA are false, resulting in a huge waste of police time. The LAPD would no longer respond to home burglar alarms unless some human on the spot verified an actual problem. Bratton also pushed to end high-speed car chases. These, he said, jeopardized innocent lives in often ineffectual grandstanding for a live television audience.

But even in the area of policing, New York can learn some things from L.A.

The saddest example is probably the issue of helicopter rescue from tall buildings, raised acutely by the World Trade Center attack. Los Angeles is the only major city in the United States that requires all high-rise buildings to have helicopter pads on their roofs, and has elaborate plans and procedures, successfully implemented on several occasions, for rescuing people by helicopter from burning high-rise buildings. For about an hour-and-a-half after the first and second planes struck in New York on September 11, hundreds of people were trapped in the upper floors of the World Trade Center above the flames, unable or uncertain whether to descend by stairs, and calling for help on their cell phones, as recent transcripts in the New

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York Times revealed. Although police helicopters were hovering nearby, there were no helicopter landing facilities on the top of either tower and the doors to the roof were securely locked.

But what New York can best learn from Los Angeles is whether what happened to crime in New York City was some kind of fluke or whether there is truth to Bratton's theory that police reforms introduced by an energetic leadership can make a major difference in crime rates and police culture. Indeed, the causes of the drop in crime in New York City, as well as in America generally, have been among the most hotly debated topics in contemporary America. Bratton forcefully attributed the drop to new police tactics adopted while he was commissioner. Critics replied that since the number of murders in New York City was falling for two years before Bratton became commissioner, if anyone in city government is to get credit it should be then Mayor David Dinkins and his police commissioner Raymond Kelly. But these critics also questioned whether police tactics had anything much to do with the drop in crime, which they pointed out occurred in other cities where the New York Police Department's tactics were not adopted. They argued instead that demographics (especially a drop in the teenage population, which commits a disproportionate share of crime) and the decline in the crack epidemic were responsible for the decline in murders. Bratton and his supporters replied that the teenage population was not, in fact, declining in most of these cities including New York, and even if the number of murders was falling in New York City before Bratton became commissioner, it fell at a much faster rate after he took over. Others added that some of Bratton's reforms had, indeed, been introduced two years earlier by Raymond Kelly, which would explain why crime rates started to fall before Bratton began. Reflecting a view that the complete causes of the decline have not been understood, one of the recent studies of the topic was titled New York Murder Mystery.

Although it is still far too soon to be sure, the latest data from the City of Los Angeles are starting to support those who credit Bratton. By the end of August, 2003, homicides there had fallen 26 percent compared with the same time last year, from a total of 420 to 326. Further supportive of Bratton is the fact that in the rest of Los Angeles County -- the bailiwick of County Sheriff Baca, not Bratton and the LAPD -- homicides rose by 11 percent (to 217) during the same period.

HOLLYWOOD ON THE HUDSON

Though most of these examples show lessons that New York can learn from Los Angeles, the truth is, New York has already picked up plenty. The movie industry is a major example. The best New York film makers -- Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee, Woody Allen, Brian De Palma, Susan Seidelman, et al -- have showed, starting in the mid-1970s, that it is possible to "go Hollywood" while maintaining a Manhattan address.

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Meanwhile, while Lincoln Center has scaled back its plans, Disney Hall, the new Frank Gehry-designed home of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, will open this month, not in some well-to-do suburb but in the heart of downtown, and has attracted rock-concert-like lines to purchase tickets for Bach and Mozart.

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