

# GATHER THE PEOPLE

Community and Faith-Based Organizing and Development Resources

[www.gatherthepeople.org](http://www.gatherthepeople.org)

## REBUILDING DEMOCRACY: Kick-Starting the Public Powers and Power-Leverage of Popular Assemblies

By Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

The perennially unpopular call to rebuild the structure of American democracy from the bottom up has persisted for decades,<sup>1</sup> but it's usually rejected out of hand as a pipe dream.<sup>2</sup> Yet, perhaps now, there is a glimmer of interest in this visionary strategy to empower the grassroots citizenry in response to the deadly threat arrayed against our representative democracy. Previously unimagined horrors of rising authoritarianism have begun to be revealed unmistakably in our political culture and institutions. The menace no longer remains theoretical, since its step-by-step implementation has become the legislative and administrative mission of Republican-ruled state legislatures and executives,<sup>3</sup> a sizable caucus of Republican members of Congress, and the politicized agenda of the SCOTUS.

Yet nothing in the way of a countervailing *institution-wide* response has emerged that shows any promise of deflating the raging white grievance, nativism, and great replacement rhetoric set loose by Trump and now piloting the Republican party from the rear. In the absence of an antidote, the MAGA threat has become a runaway populist train of reactionary nationalism, driven by Trump the engineer with the imprimatur of the brotherhood of billionaires,<sup>4</sup> racing toward its final fascist-oligarchic destination. The power-unit energizing this locomotion is the swelling size and assertiveness—political, economic, social, and cultural—of the non-white population, which serves as the inexhaustible fuel of Trump's authoritarianism. Magnifying our peril, the consciousness of the population at-large, dominated by health-related threats to personal and family well-being from the pandemic, suggests that the historic demise of U.S. democracy may pass unnoticed by most of the citizenry.

Internet media and the mainstream print-press are awash with predictions—from reputable academics, highly regarded journalists, scholarly nonprofit institutes, and well-regarded professionals in politics and economics—that without a major countervailing initiative, the institutions of American democracy will be moribund by the end of the 2024 presidential election. Google “death of U.S. democracy” to confirm that the

survival of our electoral democracy is no better than an even-money wager. But so far, neither the Democratic party,<sup>5</sup> the Congress,<sup>6</sup> the President, nor the SCOTUS has demonstrated the wherewithal (i.e., the integrity, courage, self-interest, or patriotism) to put the brakes on this runaway train. And since the station-stops on its planned route exist almost entirely in Republican-controlled state legislatures, if Congress does not pass major electoral reform legislation, which has been blocked by Republican filibustering, the dystopian end of the line for American democracy looms dead ahead.<sup>7</sup>

### *Taking Up the Challenge*

The issue more and more coming into focus is not how we can save our democracy but how we will eventually rebuild it following its further enfeeblement. Already, before the final unraveling, the existential challenge calls to us: Rebuild our democracy! Start now, at the grassroots, set in motion a movement-struggle for much greater, direct citizen control of representative government.

The most promising starting place to transform the institutions of governance appears to be the urban city, because it is closest to the demos, where most of us live and work. It is the most politically accessible government, ground-zero of the nation's poverty, oppression, and injustice, the center of capitalist wealth, and the heartbeat of the global economy.

The most promising community organizing objective appears to be the institutionalization of the right of every citizen to participate personally in the wielding of municipal public powers,<sup>8</sup> not as an advisor or critic but a legally entitled decision-maker.

And the most promising organizing model appears to be the directly democratic popular assembly, patterned on the “open-town” governments of New England. They stand as a four-century American example of what we can achieve by taking on the long-overdue structural rebuilding work. It was the “Town meeting [that] fueled the spark that ultimately led to the American Revolution, and was lauded and studied for more than a century to follow.”<sup>9</sup> As Jane Addams, a widely

admired radical leader-organizer, proclaimed more than a century ago, “. . . the cure for Democracy is more Democracy. . . .”<sup>10</sup>—but now as the lower tier of “two-tier”<sup>11</sup> urban municipal government.

Doubt about directly democratic exercise of public powers by neighborhood-based popular assemblies in a two-tier system, typically does *not* reflect distrust of the popular assembly form of governance per se. The directly democratic assemblies in New England, functioning as a lower tier of government within counties, remain broadly popular with the citizenry there.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, most moderates, liberals, and progressives support granting some of the public powers directly to the people. In fact, the last half-century of base-building grassroots community and faith-based organizing has been preoccupied with building “people power,” one might say to the exclusion of ideological conviction (notwithstanding a vague “Jeffersonianism”), and self-confidently eschewing any need to restructure our democratic institutions. Historian Lawrence Goodwyn (d. 2013) pointed out several decades ago, based on his classic study of Populism, even committed reformers accept the idea that their reforms will not significantly transform the structure of power-inequality.<sup>13</sup>

As the urban municipality evolves into the “global city,” professional practitioners and academic scholars tell us it will become the hub of information, communication, and manufacturing technologies<sup>14</sup>—and the ever-more-treasured cornucopia feeding the fascist-oligarchy. As the technologies of the future increasingly dominant our lives, both for good and evil, the presence of counter-controlling citizen social action will become decisive in the survival of our democracy.

### ***Institutionalizing Popular Assemblies***

Three especially troubling concerns have been raised about institutionalizing grassroots social action through the establishment of directly democratic popular assemblies with limited public powers:

- *First*, that cities cannot be governed effectively by popular assemblies. It’s thought to be impractical, because the demands placed on urban government arise not only from neighborhoods but across district-wide and metropolitan political and economic jurisdictions. We have responded elsewhere in detail to this claim, concluding that in the context of two-tier urban municipal or metropolitan government, it doesn’t stand up to scrutiny when “vill economics”<sup>15</sup> and the histories of the municipal reform and public choice movements<sup>16</sup> are considered.
- *Second*, that given the current socio-political climate, popular assemblies, as described above, are vulnerable to hostile take-overs by anti-democratic, reactionary forces, such as right-wing Republicans intent on electoral subversion and suppression of the franchise. This belief appears to reflect a lack of familiarity with the New England open-town model of popular assem-

bly. So we need to take a deeper look at this unique form of government:

The structure and history of the New England “open town” make it unlike any other government entity in the world. In our era, long after their founding, open town governments in New England continue as popular assemblies, exercising public powers, with membership extended to every adult citizen, entitling each to participate politically in the official exercise of the public powers, directly and in-person.

Each town elects an odd number of “selectmen” (which includes women), usually three or five, but sometimes as many as nine or 11. The officeholders call annual and special meetings, propose laws and policies, and generally supervise a broad range of town activities. Their powers also extend to appointment of other town officials. *However, while the selectmen may plan roads and other public works and the tax assessments to pay for them, these plans and assessments do not have the force of law until the citizens “signify their satisfaction” in an open town meeting.* In many respects, the viability of open New England town government is due to the excellence of this selectmen system. While the selectmen serve as an *advisory* management committee, the legislative power remains *completely* vested in the popular assembly itself. There is no persuasive evidence in the records of any serious encroachment by selectmen on the prerogatives of town meetings.

In fact, there is no history of successful corruption of a New England open-town government. One would have to corrupt virtually the entire citizenry to corrupt the government as an institution, since every citizen is both a direct producer and consumer of town government ordinances, administrative policies, and services, in addition to, on rare occasion, acting directly to alter the structure of the government itself (for the sake of greater efficiency, economy, accountability, equity or equality; say, like adding finance committees, town managers, and more meeting days).

The qualities noted above suggest another obstacle to hostile take-overs of open-town governments: the costs and difficulties versus the prospective benefits to be obtained would be a huge disincentive. Taking over individual state governments and even urban municipalities is highly attractive to narrowly self-interested forces, because those governments have a great deal of power and resources at their command, and the electoral system in this country makes such take-overs attractive, given the feasibility of corrupting of elected public officials without legal consequences.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, any *individual* open-town neighborhood government would be unlikely to have significant power or resources, and its proposed basic structure and culture would make it invulnerable to corruption as an institution.

- *Third*, that the usefulness of establishing urban popular assemblies with public powers is doubtful because it is believed that, even with those powers, this

method of strengthening powerless urban populations will not provide compelling power-leverage. The belief is, there is no reason to think that ultimately, in the face of high-stakes, zero-sum conflict, neighborhood-based populations, even possessing public powers, will have any leverage on metropolitan, state, and national governments or major corporations. Supposedly, even if dozens or hundreds of urban neighborhood governments were established and aligned on a metropolitan or state issue, their public powers would be of little use—which brings us to the *raison d'être* of this article.

This claimed limitation of directly democratic popular assemblies seems to reflect limited knowledge, experience, and imagination regarding the actual formation and potential of such local governments when allied in common purpose. Their acquisition of public powers, which entails much more than simply achieving a formal change in the structure of governance, offers some initial insight.

Consider what happened when the residents of one Southern California neighborhood discovered that they were entirely without a water supply for their homes, because the private company that had been providing water service had not maintained its equipment for decades and, when the equipment failed, the owner absconded. The residents of the neighborhood decided they no longer wanted to be at the mercy of a profit-making company, so they began the process of forming a special district government to own and manage their water service, a structural transformation of local governance. Equally important, the residents developed a culture of self-sustaining power, performance, and persistence. The benchmark of that culture was “never again!—we will do whatever it takes to protect ourselves from injustice and injury.”

Under the circumstances, it may be inferred that, “In direct personal participation . . . people both learn the skills of citizenship and develop a taste for freedom; thereafter they form an active rather than deferential, apathetic, or privatized constituency for state and national representation, an engaged public. . . .”<sup>18</sup>

Certainly, there are limits on possible neighborhood government initiatives,<sup>19</sup> regardless of the public powers they may acquire, because they, like the special district mentioned above, will be subject to the laws and judicial orders of city, county, state, and federal governments within which they will exist. Empowered neighborhoods have no prospect of becoming micro-states or self-directing “constitutional republics” in their own right.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, because of the potential to achieve (1) a *transformation of governance* by becoming the lower tier of two-tier urban governments, with limited grants of public powers; and (2) a *cultural transformation*, going from subservient dependency as mostly ignored individual neighborhood residents to members of neighborhood popular assemblies, with growing consciousness of their combined strength, there is the possibility that acting together they will eventually take

into their own hands a radical power-lever, drawing on the tradition of the American Revolution.

### ***Grassroots Power-Leverage***

My notion of a directly democratic, popular-assembly power-lever takes its cue from the potency<sup>21</sup> of the labor strike in the modern era, manifested to extraordinary effect during the first half of the last century.

Reaching back to our founding as a nation, we can identify another power-lever, one which was the pivotal tactical innovation and the “key event” of the Revolution—the Boston Tea Party. The Tea Party was an open rejection by the lower level of government, the citizenry of the colonies, against their governmental superiors, the British Crown. The essence of their tactic was *tax-action*, not by individuals but *lower-level governments acting in concert* to effect a negotiated reconciliation with the Crown.

Prior to the Tea Party, the colonies had reacted with protests against the Sugar Act and the Stamp Act, which caused the British Parliament to repeal those taxes and, ultimately, remove all the taxes except on tea. American outrage was not about the financial burden of the tea tax, which was only pennies a year for the average family, but the lack of actual representation of the colonists in Parliament.<sup>22</sup> The colonies wanted control over the public powers of governance, which, remaining unreconciled, eventually led to the Revolutionary War.

We can easily see the parallels to the current widespread money-corruption of the higher echelons of representative government in the U.S., perverted as they have been by massive corporate and billionaire special interests, effectively disempowering the grassroots citizenry from government decision-making, from the exercise of the public powers.

*Individual* tax resistance, well-reported in the media, typically serves to make a “principled statement” against what is believed to be unjust or illegitimate activity of the national government. The typical outcome is that the individual resisters are arrested, tried, and sentenced for violation of federal law, or at least financially penalized.

The picture changes fundamentally, however, when we imagine thousands of allied neighborhood residents, acting together through their directly democratic assemblies, which we have already seen them do in New England,<sup>23</sup> and in the future taking the profound step of negotiating reconciliation of their tax obligations.

The concept of *tax reconciliation* differs in essence from tax resistance and refusal, because its proposed purpose is neither to avoid nor rebel against taxation. Instead, the aim would be to negotiate the extent of neighborhood government economic support given to higher levels of government, according to agreed-upon vesting of control over some services, regulations, and legislation in the neighborhood governments by those higher governments. The goal would be to reconcile

through tax-liability negotiations the demands of the citizenry for greater control of the public powers.

This David-and-Goliath matchup of neighborhoods trying to exert power over municipal, state, and national governments seems outlandish—until we recall that the earliest recorded American labor strike was in 1768 but it wasn't until the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) that the right to strike was protected by federal law. Before the NLRA, “Bosses persuaded the courts to issue injunctions to declare a strike illegal. If the strike continued, the participants would be thrown into prison.”<sup>24</sup> At the outset, say during the early history of the craft unions, the idea that locals would eventually come together to exert power over massive corporate monopolies must also have seemed preposterous to many.<sup>25</sup> But the strike, which initially may have been regarded as a futile gesture, became the irresistible political and economic leverage of consolidated organized labor to effect local, state, and national policy.

Can we imagine any way to circumvent municipal, metropolitan, and state governments from prosecuting or otherwise harassing thousands or even hundreds of thousands of individuals who refuse to pay their taxes? Won't homeowners fear losing their homes if they refuse to pay their property taxes? And how can it be possible to refuse to pay sales tax?

David Ben-Gurion once said, “All the experts are experts on what was. There are no experts on what will be.”<sup>26</sup> We can't know all the strategic and tactical possibilities today, any more than the organizers and leaders of any movement know at the outset the strategies and tactics they will eventually devise because necessity is the mother of invention. We know we will find examples to learn from, not in the history of principled individual tax resistance but in the unprincipled schemes of corporate tax and regulatory avoidance. It was the railroad tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt who infamously articulated the relevant business ethic: “What do I care about the law? Hain't I got the power?”<sup>27</sup>

Powerful corporations offload their tax obligations through legislative lobbying and tax-liability negotiations with the IRS. To achieve similar ends, governments, even small ones, as Robert Moses so effectively showed with New York's public authorities (like California's special districts), can acquire powers out of public view by introducing highly technical, low-visibility revisions to tax codes, thereby effectively nullifying the limitations of the authorities.<sup>28</sup> Such tactics may yet be found for neighborhood governments by progressive lawyers and researchers working in the fields of government tax accountancy and administrative law.

As an opening gambit, a more straightforward approach to empower neighborhoods regarding taxation was proposed by the late U.S. Senator, Mark Hatfield. Hatfield submitted his “Neighborhood Government Act” in 1973 and for several years after that. The Act, SB2502, was essentially “A bill to amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1954 to provide a tax credit for con-

tributions to a neighborhood corporation and to provide other financial assistance to such corporations under State law to furnish their own neighborhood services.”

Hatfield was motivated by “. . . the imperative to decentralize power . . . and the requirement of government, if it is to be democratic, effective and responsive, to be rooted close to the people.”<sup>29</sup> His spirited, articulate defense of the Act was detailed, comprehensive, and inspiring. But, not surprisingly, in the face of virulent opposition by municipal officials and the absence of an organized movement dedicated to its passage, the Act passed away without awakening a supportive constituency. On Hatfield's death, the *National Review* noted that the Neighborhood Government Act was “embraced by many New Leftists . . . and libertarians. . . Naturally it went nowhere.”<sup>30</sup>

Can an alliance of moderate, liberal, and progressive organizations in an urban municipality bring about a statewide ballot initiative and a municipal charter-reform initiative to establish neighborhood-based popular assemblies with limited grants of public powers? Can they deliver an initiative which also requires that a limited percentage sales tax collected by businesses be deposited into a “community-escrow” trust account to ensure “reconciliation” with higher-level taxing authorities? Imagine taxes paid into such trust accounts, supervised by directly democratic assemblies, paid in turn to the appropriate governments when negotiated *institutional tax reconciliations* have been endorsed by a vote of the citizen-members of the assemblies.

### ***Path of Social Salvation***

Surely, the rebuilding of American democracy demands structural change that directly empowers the demos, which is the only plausible countervailing force against the metastasizing fascist oligarchy. But as Jonathan Rosenblum reminds us:

. . . a potent, sustained movement must rest on more than economic and political principles. It also must draw upon the values that emanate from our deepest human emotions and desires for justice and community. The call for spiritual morality, whether advanced by organized religion or secular humanist yearnings, has played a decisive role in leading struggles throughout history. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s and the abolitionist movement of a century earlier are but two examples of struggles that were propelled forward by powerful calls for spiritual morality. Today, the embryonic movements that fuse direct action with a spiritually based call for justice offer similar promise.<sup>31</sup>

This lesson teaches that to achieve our goal will require much more than grassroots power-building. It will also depend on rebuilding unified community, but always with the knowledge that the flourishing of *every* life is the root and measure of our commonweal.

And a successful movement for the commonweal must be founded on the unflinching faith and hope of both the organizers and those becoming organized, which will be needed to sustain the sacrifices we will be called to make.

To prevail eventually will demand that we come together to learn and to take action devoted to a path not only of enlightened democratic politics and public

administration but moral-spiritual goodness. The way is mapped for us with six unmistakable guideposts from our sacred texts,<sup>32</sup> which can lead us to our social salvation: Righteousness, Truth, Justice, Freedom, Peace, and Kindness<sup>33</sup>—because we can only build historic movement on a widely shared moral-spiritual vision of the future.

---

<sup>1</sup> See: Milton Kotler, *Neighborhood Government: The Local Foundations of Political Life* (New York, NY: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969); David Morris and Karl Hess, *Neighborhood Power* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1975); and Moshe ben Asher, “Political Liberty and Neighborhood Government,” *USA Today* (November 1978) [[https://gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/NEIGHBORHOOD\\_GOVERNMENT.pdf](https://gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/NEIGHBORHOOD_GOVERNMENT.pdf)], originally published under my former English name, Michael Silver.

<sup>2</sup> However, there continues to be a handful of scholars and intellectuals committed to much fuller, direct participation of the citizenry in public affairs. For example, see Liz Mineo, “How to get people to talk to one another again?—Citizens’ assemblies,” Interview of Jane Mansbridge, *The Harvard Gazette* (May 5, 2021) [<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/05/jane-mansbridge-offers-a-solution-to-mending-a-riven-democracy/>]. Mansbridge sees the growing need for what amounts to advisory citizen assemblies, but apparently does not imagine or favor their institutionalization and acquisition of public powers.

<sup>3</sup> See Barton Gelman, “Trump’s Next Coup Has Already Begun,” *Washington Post* (December 6, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> “Brotherhood” is meant to convey that U.S. billionaires have common interests about which they communicate with one another, and a common purpose, plan, and operation, with roots reaching back more than 150 years. They oppose “. . . any group or government meddling with the market,” manipulating law and policy to insulate themselves and their wealth from government regulation. See: Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains, the Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2017—Kindle edition), loc. 36; and Kurt Andersen, *Evil Geniuses—The Unmaking of America: A Recent History* (New York, NY: Random House, 2020—Kindle edition). See also Chuck Collins and Omar Ocampo, “Trump and His Many Billionaire Enablers,” Institute for Policy Studies (January 11, 2021) [<https://ips-dc.org/trump-and-his-many-billionaire-enablers/>]. On the billionaire-brotherhood control of government, see: Vicky Ward, “The Blow-It-All-Up Billionaires,” *Huffington Post* (March 17, 2017) [<http://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/mercercers/>]; Jane Mayer, *Dark Money, The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2016); and Mateo Gold and Robert Barnes, “Growing array of pro-Trump groups train cross-hairs on GOP lawmakers,” *Washington Post* (April 2, 2017) [[https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/growing-array-of-pro-trump-groups-could-be-trained-on-gop-lawmakers/2017/04/02/358deaa2-1755-11e7-833c-503e1f6394c9\\_story.html?hpid=hp\\_hp-more-top-stories\\_trumpgroups-855%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm\\_term=.006dd2548a57](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/growing-array-of-pro-trump-groups-could-be-trained-on-gop-lawmakers/2017/04/02/358deaa2-1755-11e7-833c-503e1f6394c9_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-more-top-stories_trumpgroups-855%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.006dd2548a57)]. For an example of the billionaire-brotherhood role in the Tea Party, frequently described by the media and its own members as “populist” and “grass-roots,” see: Amanda Fallin et al., “To quarterback behind the scenes, third-party efforts: the tobacco industry and the Tea Party,” *Tobacco Control*, 23:322-331 (2014); Jess Nesbit, “The Secret Origins of the Tea Party, How Big Oil and Big Tobacco Partnered with the Koch Brothers to Take Over the GOP,” *Time* (April 5, 2016) [<http://time.com/secret-origins-of-the-tea-party/>]; and Jane Mayer, “Trump’s Money Man: The Reclusive Hedge-Fund Tycoon Behind the Trump Presidency,” *The New Yorker* (March 27, 2017). On plutocrats boosting white supremacy, see Clay Risen, “William H. Regnery II, 80, Dies; Bankrolled the Rise of the Alt-Right,” *New York Times* (July 16, 2021). See also: Benjamin I. Page, Jason Seawright, and Matthew J. Lacombe, “Stealth Politics by U.S. Billionaires,” Paper prepared for delivery at the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, September 2-6, 2015 [[https://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/imce/ForbesStealthPoliticsAPSA2015August27FINAL\\_Updates.pdf](https://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/imce/ForbesStealthPoliticsAPSA2015August27FINAL_Updates.pdf)] and *Billionaires and Stealth Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); and Adanjesus Marin and Michael Kink, “It’s not the ‘Freedom Caucus.’ It’s the Billionaires’ Caucus,” *The Hill* (June 8, 2017) [<https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/politics/336963-its-not-the-freedom-caucus-its-the-billionaires-caucus/>].

<sup>5</sup> Some insight into the Democrats inability to achieve complete “party discipline,” primarily in relation to electoral and tax law (the principal means of the continued enrichment and empowerment of themselves and their patrons), is offered by H.R. Shapiro in *The Bureaucratic State: Party Bureaucracy and the Decline of Democracy in America* (New York, NY: Samizdat Press, 1975), who wrote nearly a half-century ago that, “Political parties are not and can

---

never be instruments of representative government. The ideal never-achieved goal of party leaders is to render themselves, through their mutual cooperation, utterly immune to the citizenry and to reduce all politics to the self-serving machinations of party bureaucracies—which means the death of politics and the permanent rule of irresponsible power.”

<sup>6</sup> For example, it seems doubtful that Congress will find the political will to use the power of “inherent contempt” to expeditiously expose and explode in the public consciousness the Big Lie and the liars who promote it. Regarding the “inherent contempt” power, see Congressional Research Service, “Congress’s Contempt Power and the Enforcement of Congressional Subpoenas: Law, History, Practice, and Procedure” (May 12, 2017)

[<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL34097>]. Although opinion on the left seems to be that the outcome of the House Select Committee investigating the January 6 attack on the Capitol will be something like “the truth will set us free,” none of the truth revealed over the past five years—in multiple hearings, feature news coverage, and two impeachments—regarding Trump and his MAGA-enablers and followers have had any effect whatsoever to slow down their anti-democracy momentum. Maybe we’re at a turning point, but possibly not, because the threat to white supremacy and privilege seems not to be diminishing. However, if the investigation of the January 6 attack leads to a referral to the AG for criminal prosecution of Trump, which the AG acts on, the upshot may not be MAGA-disillusionment with Trumpism but increased right-wing mendacity, civil unrest and violence.

<sup>7</sup> If this prediction seems hyperbolic, extravagant, or simply in error, the primer on the subject is historian Timothy Snyder’s *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (Tim Duggan Books, 2021). He lays out the history of the road to tyranny and calls for a recalibration of the existential threat to our democracy. Anyone still in doubt should also read the recent five-alarm-fire statement of 200 scholars of democracy. See New America, “Statement of Concern, The Threats to American Democracy and the Need for National Voting and Election Administration Standards” (June 1, 2021) [<https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/statements/statement-of-concern/>].

<sup>8</sup> “Public powers” include the power to enact civil and criminal laws and regulatory policies, to tax, to spend public monies, to police [i.e., take rights and property without compensation for the public’s health, welfare, and morals], to take property by eminent domain [with fair-market compensation], and to market tax-free bonds.”

<sup>9</sup> See AnnMarie French, “The Evolution of Town Meeting,” *Town & City Magazine* (February 2007) [<https://www.nhmunicipal.org/town-city-article/evolution-town-meeting/>], a publication of the New Hampshire Municipal Association.

<sup>10</sup> See Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1902—Kindle edition), loc. 146. To fully appreciate the gravitas of Addams’ claim, one must understand the breadth of her accomplishments: She was a radical settlement organizer, reformer, sociologist, administrator, peace activist, and author. Addams played a leading role in the development of the social work profession and the campaign for women’s suffrage. She was the first woman to receive an honorary Master of Arts degree from Yale University, was a co-founder of the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), and was the first American woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

<sup>11</sup> For an introduction to the “two-tier solution,” see Robert L. Bish and Vincent Ostrom, *Understanding Urban Government: Metropolitan Reform Reconsidered* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1973), pp. 12-15; and Vincent Ostrom, *The Political Theory of a Compound Republic: Designing the American Experiment* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> See Moshe ben Asher, “New England Town Government: A Model for Popular Assembly in Two-Tier Metropolitan Government,” *Gather the People* (1980, 2020) [[https://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/TOWN\\_GOVT.pdf](https://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/TOWN_GOVT.pdf)] (authored under my former English name, Michael Silver).

<sup>13</sup> See *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. xi. In *Democratic Promise, The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), Goodwyn writes that after the election of 1896, “The idea that serious structural reform of the democratic process was ‘inevitable’ no longer seemed persuasive to reasonable reformers. . . . A consensus thus came to be silently ratified: reform politics need not concern itself with structural alteration of the economic customs of the society. . . . The reform tradition of the twentieth century unconsciously defined itself within the framework of inherited power relationships,” p. 531.

<sup>14</sup> See: Saskia Sassen, “The Global City: Introducing a Concept,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 11(2):27-43 (Winter/Spring 2005); Josefina V. Cabigon, “Cities in Globalization,” *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, 6(2):73-102 (April 2006); Juan Pablo Pérez Sáenz and Katherine Andrade-Eekhoff, “Local Development in the Global Economy,” NACLA—North American Congress on Latin America (September 25, 2007) [<https://nacla.org/article/local-development-global-economy/>]; and Sarah Colenbrander, “Cities as engines of economic growth,” Working Paper, IIED—International Institute for Environment and Development (October 2016) [<https://pubs.iied.org/10801iied>].

- 
- <sup>15</sup> See Moshe ben Asher, “Vill Economics,” *Gather the People* (1978) [[https://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/VILL\\_ECONOMICS.pdf](https://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/VILL_ECONOMICS.pdf)] (authored under my former English name, Michael Silver).
- <sup>16</sup> See Moshe ben Asher and Khulda Bat Sarah, “Directly Democratic Metropolitan Government: Envisioning Beyond Oppression, Rebellion, and Reform,” *Social Policy*, 46(1):6-19 (Spring 2016).
- <sup>17</sup> See: Peter J. Henning, “It’s getting harder to prosecute politicians for corruption,” *The Conversation* (February 16, 2018) [<https://theconversation.com/its-getting-harder-to-prosecure-politicians-for-corruption-91609>]; and Leah Litman, “The Supreme Court Says Sorry, It Just Can’t Help With Political Corruption,” *The Atlantic* (May 8, 2020).
- <sup>18</sup> See Hanna Fenichel Pitkin and Sara M. Shumer, “On Participation,” *Democracy*, 2(4):43-54 (Fall 1982), p. 51.
- <sup>19</sup> For a comprehensive review of the possible forms of neighborhood empowerment, see Stephen R. Miller, “Legal Neighborhoods,” *Harvard Environmental Law Review*, 37(1):105-166 (2013).
- <sup>20</sup> See Kyra Gottesman and Jennie Blevins, “Oroville is now a ‘constitutional republic’—what does that mean?” *East Bay Times* (November 12, 2021).
- <sup>21</sup> The history is briefly surveyed in G. William Domhoff, “The Rise and Fall of Labor Unions in the U.S.,” *Who Rules America* (February 2013) [<https://whorulesamerica.ucsc.edu/power/history-of-labor-unions.html>].
- <sup>22</sup> See Boston Tea Party Historical Society, “Boston Tea Party, the Key Event for the Revolutionary War,” (2008) [<http://www.boston-tea-party.org/essays/essay6.html>].
- <sup>23</sup> For examples, see: See Nancy Shulins, “Vermont Towns Vote to Prohibit Nuclear Plants,” *Lewiston Evening Journal* (March 2, 1977); and David Scribner, “Resistance to gas pipeline spreads across Western Mass.,” *Berkshire—The Edge* (July 2, 2014) (accessed at: <http://theberkshiredge.com/resistance-gas-pipeline-spreads-across-western-mass/>).
- <sup>24</sup> See ushistory.org, “Labor vs. Management,” U.S. History Online Textbook (2021) [<https://www.ushistory.org/us/37b.asp>].
- <sup>25</sup> Strike were not part of the early craft-union armament; their leverage consisted primarily of economic tactics. See Wolfgang Streeck, “Labor Unions, Union Organization and Union Growth,” *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2d ed. (2015), pp. 199-204 [<https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/protest-movements>].
- <sup>26</sup> Quoted in Shimon Peres, “In Homage to Ben-Gurion,” *New York Times Magazine* (October 5, 1986), p. 104.
- <sup>27</sup> Quoted in David M. Kennedy et. al., “Reforms in Railroad,” in *The American Pageant*, 12<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin (November 2001), p. 535.
- <sup>28</sup> See Robert A. Caro, “The Power Broker—III, How Robert Moses got things done,” *The New Yorker* (August 12, 1974).
- <sup>29</sup> See Congressional Record, “Proceedings and Debates of the 93d Congress, First Session,” 119:145 (October 1, 1973).
- <sup>30</sup> See Reihan Salam, “Mark Hatfield’s Neighborhood Government Act,” *National Review* December 13, 2001).
- <sup>31</sup> See Jonathan Rosenblum, “Unions in the Trump Era,” Tikkun (email broadcast 1/2/17) [<http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/unions-facing-the-trump-era>].
- <sup>32</sup> All three Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—promulgate the values of righteousness, truth, justice, freedom, peace, and kindness, although each with its own unique theological interpretation and forms of practice. Nonetheless, they share a commonality in the application of these values to civil society. So, for example, although their particular theological views of “truth” vary, their expectation that public officials will be truthful with them is widely shared. For their particulars, see: Sam Berrin Shoukoff, “Pursuing Righteousness,” *My Jewish Learning* (n.d.) [<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/pursuing-righteousness>]; L. Nelson Bell, “Righteousness,” *Christianity Today* (June 9, 1958); Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmed of Qadian, “Righteousness,” Chap. 11 in *The Essence of Islam*, Vol. II (London Mosque, 1981) [<https://www.alislam.org/books/essence/chap11/chap11.html>]; Rabbi Louis Jacobs, “Truth and Lies in the Jewish Tradition,” *My Jewish Learning* (n.d.) [<https://myjewishlearning.com/article/truth-and-lies-in-the-jewish-tradition>]; John Caldwell, “What Is Truth?” *Christian Standard* (March 1, 2021) [<https://christianstandard.com/2021/03/what-is-truth/>]; Quran Explorer, “Speaking Truth In Islam,” *Education in the Light of Sunnah and Qura’an* (February 1, 2021) [[https://www.quranexplorer.com/blog/education-in-the-light-of-sunnah-and-qura'an/speaking\\_truth\\_in\\_islam](https://www.quranexplorer.com/blog/education-in-the-light-of-sunnah-and-qura'an/speaking_truth_in_islam)]; Rabbi Toba Spitzer, “Tzedek: The Jewish Value of Justice,” *My Jewish Learning* (n.d.) [<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tzedek-the-jewish-value-of-justice>]; Smith Hopkins, “Justice and the Christian,” *Olive Creek Church of Christ* (January 20, 2018) [<https://www.olivecreek.org/blog/2018/1/20/justice-and-the-christian-what-is-justice>]; Yasien Mohamed, “More Than Just Law: The Idea of Justice in the Qur’an,” *Yaqeen Institute* (February 7, 2020) [<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/the-idea-of-justice-in-the-quran>]; Encyclopaedia Judaica, “Freedom,” *Jewish Virtual Library* (2008) [<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/freedom>]; Michael A. Milton, “What Is True Freedom in Christianity?” *Christianity.com* (June 29, 2011) [<https://www.christian.com/Christian-life/the-true-believers-declaration-of-independence-11634198.html>]; Abdul

---

Sattar Kassem, "The Concept of Freedom in the Quran," *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 2(4):165-173 (April 2021); My Jewish Learning, "Jewish Ideas of Peace and Nonviolence," (n.d.) <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/jewish-ideas-of-peace-nonviolence>]; Volker Stümke, "The Concept of Peace in Christianity," De Gruyter (2021) [<https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110682021-002.pdf>]; Juan Cole, "The Idea of Peace in the Qur'an," Scholarly Work at the John W. Kluge Center (August 19, 2016) [<https://blogs.loc.gov/kluge/2018/08/the-idea-of-peace-in-the-quran>]; Rabbi Maurice Lamm, "Day to Day Judaism: Kindness," aish (n.d.) [<https://www.aish.com/jl/i/i/48944871/html>]; Stephen Witmer, "Kindness Changes Everything," desiringGod (September 4, 2016) <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/kindness-changes-everything>]; and Muhammed Habib, "What does Islam teach about kindness?" medium.com (December 6, 2019) [<https://medium.com/@muhammed.habib121/what-does-islam-teach-about-kindness238977edf35d>].

<sup>33</sup> It is not only the moral-spiritual power of these particular values that draws us to them, but the integrated character of their effects, because when there is no righteousness, there is no truth; when there is no truth, there is no justice; when there is no justice, there is no freedom; when there is no freedom, there is no peace; and when there is no peace, there is no kindness.

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

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

© 2021 Moshe ben Asher & Khulda Bat Sarah