

The Development of Los Angeles City Government: An Institutional History

edited by Hynda L. Rudd et al.

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*Reviewed by Volker Janssen**

A decade in the making, this massive collection of focused institutional histories and historical overviews seeks to fill a serious gap in the steadily growing literature on Los Angeles: the lack of a contemporary examination of both structure and development of the city's government. Following an introduction by senior editor Tom Sitton and a prologue by Doyce B. Nunis, Jr. on the history of Los Angeles government before its incorporation in 1850, the essays are grouped into five sections. The first three include contributions on

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organization and core function, infrastructure and land use, and social welfare. The essays in the last two sections leave the departmental focus behind and put the city into spatial, demographic, economic, and local and global political context.

Readers may want to start with Tom Sitton's introduction and Raphael Sonenshein's epilogue, which offer a handy synopsis of the overarching themes in the city's governmental history: the perennial effort at reform and insulation from "special interests," but also the city's systemic conservatism; the weakness of political parties; the lack of grassroots pressures despite the popularity of direct democracy; the importance of departments over that of charismatic politicians; the importance of a business-driven growth policy; and last but not least: the long-time abhorrence of racial diversity. Between Sitton's and Sonenshein's bookend essays lies a plethora of detail: The first section on organization and core function includes James W. Ingram's description of the city's relentless efforts at perfecting its charter. In the process, he provides some fine examples for the persistent progressive quest of "structural" and "developmental" reformers for purifying city governance from undue political influences such as the Southern Pacific Railroad (pp. 8-9). Following a similar trajectory, Marc and Paul Girard tell a story of progress in the city's efforts at efficiency and economy in the public sector by modeling itself on the ideal of a private business. In contrast, Shauna Clark's essay on city finances is a history of the rise and fall of financial self-determination between the "Home Rule" charter of 1890 and Proposition 13 in 1978. Entrusted with the rather broad topic of "Justice in Los Angeles," Gordon Bakken dips into the city's experience with water rights, liability and tort, the power of the city attorney, the role of women in Los Angeles courts. While Todd Gaydowski's essay on the fire department, focuses on the importance of technological and personnel change, the history of the Los Angeles Police Department, as told by Sandra Bass and John T. Donovan, perfectly illustrates the pitfalls of the city's quest for protection from corruption and special interests. The political independence and professionalization of the police force also insulated them from the communities they patrolled, the consequences of which—Watts in 1965, South Central in 1992—we are all familiar with.

The contributions on infrastructure and land use in city

government shift the attention from government organization and public safety to water and power, the harbor and the airport, other public works, city planning, housing, transportation, and community redevelopment. In contrast to other public services, water has of course long been a favorite among Western historians. Instead of getting mired in a historiographical debate, Paul Soifer offers a strict institutional chronology of the Department of Water and Power. Steven P. Erie, Thomas P. Kim, and Charles F. Queenan's history of the Los Angeles harbor and airport cover not just familiar ground, but also bring both infrastructural institutions into a broader context of economic changes in the nation and the Pacific Rim and environmental, labor, and neighborhood politics. Like many other contributors, Patricia Adler-Ingram's history of the department of public works—which over time included everything from water and sewer facilities to garbage disposal, road construction and maintenance—deals with the relationship between a tax thrifty electorate and growing demands for public service. Greg Hise and Todd Gish seek to counter the cynical condemnation of Los Angeles as an “unplanned city,” while at the same time acknowledging the many failures of community planning to increase successful redevelopment and public participation and to improve social relations. Similarly, Harold Beckman's essay on housing in Los Angeles highlights the importance of laissez faire real estate development, the resistance to subsidized housing, and social reformers' reliance on public-private partnerships. Closely related to this topic, Mara A. Cohen Marks's essay on Los Angeles's Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) describes CRA's emergence in the postwar years as an economic growth rather than a public housing agency in part because of local anti-social[ist] hysteria, and in part because of the fiscal constraints of Reagan's new federalism. Like Cohen Mark, Matthew W. Roth in his essay on transportation confirms Max Weber's old dictum that a capitalist market economy requires the order and stability of a bureaucratic state (p. 441).

Most historians will be drawn to the essays by Philip J. Ethington, Leonard Pitt, and Lawrence B. De Graaf first, as they put the “City in Context.” With the aid of detailed maps, charts, and chronologies—useful features most of the contributions are lacking—Ethington tells the story of the spatial making of the city. Los Angeles's

exercise of political power through its water monopoly drove much of the annexation. After the incorporation of Lakewood in 1954, a wave of postwar suburban municipal incorporation signaled the limits of city expansion, and not incidentally a racial demographic change from “Anglo-Apartheid” to “Segregated Diversity” and, presumably, white flight. When it comes to matters of race, De Graaf points out in an excellent essay, the history of Los Angeles city government is “as much one of things not done as of positive policies” (p. 729). This mix—segregationist and oppressive policies on the one hand and equal access on the other; political participation and de facto disfranchisement through government neglect now and city hall leadership later—remind us that figuratively speaking, Los Angeles, like the American West more generally, is the place where the North, the South, and the Pacific meet. Looking deeper into local and ethnic enclaves, Leonard Pitt’s essay on the search for community empowerment in Los Angeles highlights the tension between the city as a political and territorial giant on the one hand and the struggle for local self-governance and urban democracy on the other, resulting in the city’s notoriously weak public culture and lack of civic pride. The history of Bunker Hill and Chavez Ravine certainly lend support to Carey McWilliams’s charge that Los Angeles “has shown the incompetence of an idiot giant in dealing with its affairs”—an estimate many of the contributors seek to counter (p. 706).

Jennifer L. Koslow, Frances Loman Feldman, Michael Eberts, Gloria Ricci Lothrop, and Judith R. Raftery add institutional histories of public health, human services, recreation and parks, the public library, and, of course, city schools. They share an overall narrative of progress, acknowledge the steady importance of race in the unequal access to service, suggest a frequent reliance on private charities and philanthropy, and describe today’s challenges in social services in the context of increasing urban diversity and tax restraints. Like many of the other contributions, these essays are best read in combination with De Graaf’s, Ethington’s, and Pitt’s contextual essays, as well as with Alan Saltzstein’s, Robert A. Bauman’s, and Suzanne Borghei’s essays on “external influences” beyond city hall: joint powers authorities and intergovernmental relations, the connections between economic changes and the demand for public services, and globalization. In

contrast to the micro-perspective of the first three groups of essays, these articles place Los Angeles within state and county, at the center of an industrial globalizing economy, and on the Pacific Rim. To this reviewer, however, these dimensions are less externalities than essential dimensions that provide the universe in which Los Angeles government operates.

Written by historians, political scientists and public administrators, the contributions vary widely in style and quality, can overlap considerably, and—with some significant exceptions—tend to prize detail and narrative over analysis and interpretation. Much of this lies in the nature of a documentary institutional history and in no way limits the value of this compendium for the future research and study of Los Angeles. Adding to the value of this collection as a reference is a long appendix by Hynda L. Rudd, James Ingram, Robert Freeman and Irene Tresun that includes a list of Los Angeles mayors and council members, a chronology of Los Angeles's city halls, city government organization charts of the past 150 years, an index, and a particularly useful introduction to the Los Angeles city archives and documents. With two elegantly bound, but hefty volumes of almost 1000 pages total, *The Development of Los Angeles City Government* will be most useful on library reference shelves for serious students of California history and cities of the American West.