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# Karl Hess: A Life on the (Right) Left (and Right)

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shape, hands and heads. They can be attached to the punched cards of a time clock or the identity cards of a police state, or the chains of a slave system. But they remain in reality.<sup>3</sup>

My vision of freedom, then, is formed around the rights of natural association, of people coming together in community for perhaps varied reasons, even for accidental geographic reasons. It is formed from the observed ability of people to decide for themselves, in such a natural association, how best to get along together, how to work, how to play, how to make divisions between those things which are wanted to be done alone and those wanted to be done together, and so forth.

The vision emphasizes being a person and doing things in a specific time and place.<sup>4</sup>

And beyond that he was also, to a great extent, an anarchist without adjectives in his earlier and later right-wing phases as well — if only in spite of himself.

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<sup>3</sup> Hess, *Dear America*, p. 193.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Hess, *Dear America* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1875), p. 263.

## Introduction. Focus of This Paper

Over the past decade or more, I've done a considerable number of C4SS studies on particular anarchist thinkers. Since my formal titles at Center for a Stateless Society include Karl Hess Chair of Social Theory, it's probably well past time to do one on Hess.

Karl Hess's intellectual career is a long arc from the Old Right through the mid-60s, to the New Left, and back to the right starting in the late 70s or so. In his Old Right phase, he was associated with William F. Buckley in the early days of the *National Review*, "worked closely with Joe McCarthy" (including writing his speeches), and was also on the staff of the American Enterprise Institute. Working for a union-busting consultant, he wrote pamphlets "exposing any known Communist Party or Communist-line association of anyone involved in a local organizing effort." He was chief speechwriter for the Goldwater campaign and principle author of the 1960 and 1964 Republican platforms.<sup>1</sup> In his New Left period he joined the Industrial Workers of the World, had friendly ties with the Black Panthers, and worked at the Institute for Policy Studies. He went on in the 1970s to a prolonged period of involvement in the community and alternative technology movement — an interest that never left him, even after his return to the right.<sup>2</sup> In the 80s he returned, in his own words, "back to my roots as a classical liberal," at one point editing a periodical for the Libertar-

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Hess, *Mostly On the Edge: An Autobiography*. Edited by Karl Hess, Jr. (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1999), pp. 36–37, 136–138, 157.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38–39.

ian Party (which had itself, of course, moved considerably to the right since its founding).<sup>3</sup>

The extent of his shift back to the right in his later years is evidenced by his passionate defense, in retrospect, of McCarthyism. McCarthy, he said “was not... wrong. There was a Communist menace. He helped create the atmosphere in which important parts of it could be exposed.”<sup>4</sup> It’s also suggested by the fact that Charles Murray — of *The Bell Curve* fame — wrote the Foreword to his autobiography, and that Hess cited him as his *beau ideal* (“thinkers of the caliber of Charles Murray”) of a social thinker.<sup>5</sup>

Surveying his earlier leftist views from the perspective of his 60s, he referred to them as “madness,” repudiating them in the clichéd language of the right-wing commentariat (“politics of envy”),<sup>6</sup> and dismissing left-wing economic theory in the kind of superficial terms that might have come from a Townhall columnist. For example, his framing of “the labor theory of value in action”:

Suppose that you want to have a table painted. Someone comes along who says he will have the table painted for \$100. Finding people who want things painted is his business. The price seems fine to you and the deal is made.

The person who agreed to have the table painted, according to Marx, is a capitalist, because he did not mean to paint the table himself. He was arranging for someone else to do the actual physical labor. He would put up the capital (money) to get the job done, but would not do the actual work.

He spends ten dollars to buy the paint and brushes that will be needed to paint the table. That money, used for

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57–58.

simple abstractions like the cash nexus or doctrinaire socialism....

Graeber’s anarchism is, above all else, human-centered. It entails a high regard for human agency and reasonableness. Rather than fitting actual human beings into some idealized anarchist paradigm, he displays an openness to — and celebration of — whatever humans may actually do in exercising that agency and reasonableness. Anarchy isn’t what people will do “after the Revolution,” when some sort of “New Anarchist Man” has emerged who can be trusted with autonomy; it’s what they do right now. “Anarchists are simply people who believe human beings are capable of behaving in a reasonable fashion without having to be forced to.”<sup>2</sup>

If that were still a going project, I might have included this study of Karl Hess in it. Certainly in his middle phase, his New Left and communitarian periods, it’s beyond dispute that Hess perfectly fit the anarchist-without-adjectives paradigm. His vision was not so much of any “ism,” as of a world of a thousand and one homely, human-scale institutions by which people managed their own lives. For him corporate capitalism of both the conservative and liberal-managerialist variety, and state socialism of the Soviet variety, were acts of violence against this flesh and blood humanity. As he wrote in *Dear America*:

People, as individuals, may disappear from view in various social theories, but they never disappear in social practice. They persist. They have names, or at least identities. They have passions, quirks, size,

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<sup>2</sup> Kevin A. Carson, *David Graeber’s Anarchist Thought: A Survey* (Center for a Stateless Society, 2014) <<https://c4ss.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/graeber.pdf>>, pp. 3–4.

*between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being.”*

The interesting thing about this is that it could serve as an accurate description of virtually any anarchist society, including the libertarian communist sort favored by Kropotkin, Goldman, or Malatesta, the kind of anarcho-syndicalism favored by most of the Wobblies and CNT, the anarcho-collectivism of Bakunin, the mutualism of Proudhon, or the market anarchism of Thomas Hodgskin and Benjamin Tucker. And it’s appropriate that Graeber chose it as his epigraph, because his affection for “freely constituted groups” and the “free arrangements” concluded between them is bigger than any doctrinaire attempt to pigeonhole such groups and arrangements as business firms operating in the cash nexus or moneyless collectives.

Graeber... is characterized above all by a faith in human creativity and agency, and an unwillingness to let a priori theoretical formulations either preempt his perceptions of the particularity and “is-ness” of history, or interfere with the ability of ordinary, face-to-face groupings of people on the spot to develop workable arrangements — whatever they may be — among themselves. Graeber is one of those anarchist (or anarchist-ish) thinkers who, despite possibly identifying with a particular hyphenated variant of anarchism, have an affection for the variety and particularity of self-organized, human-scale institutions that goes beyond ideological label. These people, likewise, see the relationships between individual human beings in ways that can’t be reduced to

starting-up costs, is called capital. It is money that people have saved out of work they did in the past.

The capitalist finds an unemployed person who will be happy to paint the table for \$50. The deal is made. The table is painted. The painter receives \$50. The capitalist has already spent ten dollars for material, so he pockets \$40 in profit...

Marxism claims that the capitalist should have no role in this affair, and that he doesn’t deserve a penny. yet the unemployed person who actually painted the table is now \$50 richer. The man who wanted the table painted now has a painted table, for a price he was willing to pay. And the capitalist is paid \$40 for having ensured that these satisfactory events should have taken place.<sup>7</sup>

He also denounced a strawman caricature of “America haters” using the demagogic rhetoric of a Spiro Agnew: “Where else on the face of the earth would these unthinking critics want to live?”<sup>8</sup>

For anyone familiar with my own previous work, it should come as no surprise that I associate Hess’s most valuable contributions with his middle period; it will, accordingly, be the focus of this study.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 134–135.

## I. Rumspringa

In the period following Goldwater's defeat and the purge of Goldwaterites from the Republican Party, Hess spent some time spinning his wheels. He took up motorcycles, lived for a while on a houseboat, and learned welding as a way of making a living — as well as keeping his bikes operational and his houseboat afloat.<sup>1</sup>

During this early post-Goldwater phase, he spent several years undergoing two concurrent and mutually influencing ideological transformations. For much of this time he saw the two trends as more complementary than conflicting.

First, he came under the influence of Murray Rothbard and adopted the anarcho-capitalist ideology.

He was present for the annual YAF convention in August 1969, in St. Louis, where the formal split and walkout of the classical liberal faction was the beginning of a movement that led to the formation of the Libertarian Party.<sup>2</sup> According to Jeff Rigggenbach, Hess “helped Rothbard try to steer the libertarian students who walked out of the convention en masse into their left-leaning, anarchist-friendly Radical Libertarian Alliance instead of the more Randian and minarchist Society for Individual Liberty.”<sup>3</sup>

Samuel Edward Konkin III — a witness to the events, and as a self-described “left-Rothbardian” whose primary political inspiration was the ca. 1969 Murray Rothbard at his point of closest

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>3</sup> Jeff Rigggenbach, “Karl Hess and the Death of Politics,” *Libertarianism.org*, September 20, 2021 <<https://www.libertarianism.org/articles/karl-hess-and-death-politics>>.

## Conclusion

Over a period of several years, some time back, I wrote a series of studies for C4SS on the common theme of “anarchists without adjectives.” My descriptions of Colin Ward and David Graeber in terms of that ethos will, I hope, give some idea of what I mean by it:

Like Kropotkin's, Ward's was a communism expressed in a love for a wide variety of small folk institutions, found throughout the nooks and crannies of history, of a sort most people would not think of when they hear the term “communism.” Kropotkin himself resembled William Morris in his fondness for the small-scale, local, quaint and historically rooted — especially medieval folkmotes, open field villages, free towns, guilds, etc. — as expressions of the natural communism of humanity.<sup>1</sup>

David Graeber chose, as the epigraph to his book *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, a quote from Pyotr Kropotkin's article on Anarchism for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. In it Kropotkin stated that, in an anarchist society, harmony would be

*“obtained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free arrangements concluded*

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin A. Carson, *The Anarchist Thought of Colin Ward* (Center for a Stateless Society, 2014) <<https://c4ss.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/colinward.pdf>>, pp. 4–5.



His reputation from this project resulted in election or appointment to a number of positions, including membership in the West Virginia Academy of Sciences, the Appropriate Technology Task Force of the U.S. Congress Office of Technology Assessment, and the Governor's Advisory Committee on Appropriate Technology.<sup>48</sup>

Even during his right-wing phase — an evolution already well underway when he moved to West Virginia — this fondness for decentralized technology never left him. Writing his autobiography, in the last years of his life, he enthused:

Here is where tools and technology seem so liberating; they are moving toward decentralized deployment. Cottage industry now includes gene splicers and cybernated milling machines, not to mention endless attics of retrievable data. More importantly, tools and technology are moving toward miniaturization, a key feature that makes it possible to decentralize their deployment and command. Decentralization, these are the undoing of central power, the features that must strike terror in the heart of any old-fashioned tyrant.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

cooperation with the New Left — recounted that the laissez-faire secessionists from YAF were joined by libertarian socialist refugees from YAF, in laying the groundwork for what would become the Libertarian Party.

In 1969, both the SDS and the Young Americans for Freedom split at their respective conventions. The “right” Libertarians from YAF joined the free-market anarchists from SDS at a historic conference in New York over Columbus Day weekend, called by Murray Rothbard and Karl Hess. In February of 1970, several activists working for Robert LeFevre organized an even bigger conference in Los Angeles at USC, which included Hess, SDS ex-president Carl Oglesby, and just about every big name in the Movement up to that point. I attended both, as well as the YAF Convention in St. Louis before.

After L.A.'s conference, campus Libertarian Alliances sprung up around the country. I personally organized five in Wisconsin during 1970 and a dozen in down-state New York (New York City and environs) from 1971–73.<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere, Konkin wrote: “[Jerome] Tuccille... joined Rothbard and others in the early pre-St. Louis attempt to create a Libertarian movement out of YAF and SDS chapters, the Radical Libertarian Alliance (RLA).”

In February 1970..., the California Libertarian Alliance hosted the Left-Right Festival of Mind Liberation at USC. Nearly 500 activists showed up to hear LeFevre, SDS former president Carl Oglesby, Hess,

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Burton, “Interview With Samuel Edward Konkin III” (2002) <<http://www.spaz.org/~dan/individualist-anarchist/software/konkin-interview.html>>.

Rohrabacher, SEK3, and most of the early activists. Press coverage of libertarians (such as the con coverage in the *LA Free Press*) was growing, peaking with the 1971 color cover on the *New York Times Magazine* (see below).

Libertarian Alliances... spread to every major campus during 1970.<sup>5</sup>

It was in this general period, March 1969, when his article “The Death of Politics” appeared in *Playboy*. It contributed immensely to the ideological culture of the early Libertarian Party.

Meanwhile, starting sometime in the mid-1960s, Rothbard had become increasingly intrigued by the New Left and its possible affinities with his Goldwaterite positions. At some point he entered into a dialogue with the Institute for Policy Studies, beginning an evolutionary process that eventually led to a near full-blown adoption of the New Left ideology.

Establishing an actual chronology correlating the two ideological trends requires a fair bit of detective work and educated guessing. Hess gives no specific dates in *Mostly On the Edge*, either for the initial feelers from Raskin and Barnet or for his more formal collaboration with the Institute for Policy Studies. Just based on the internal logic of the text, one might get the impression that his dialogue with the New Left started pretty early on following the Goldwater defeat. But Hess provides few specific dates for the period between the 1964 election and the events at the 1969 YAF Convention, and all the material concerning his welding and biking interests, Rothbard and anarcho-capitalism, and the New Left and IPS, is quite jumbled. It might well be a conflation of events in that time period either as a result of his unreliable memory at the

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<sup>5</sup> Samuel Edward Konkin III, “History of the Libertarian Movement” (n.d.) <<https://web.archive.org/web/19990429142502/http://www.loop.com/~sek3/nl/history.html>>. Unfortunately, however, I’ve never seen Konkin’s account of the SDS dissidents’ role corroborated by any other source.

to someone on the streets the greeting has new and neighborly meaning.<sup>44</sup>

Although the Community Technology project fell apart for lack of a sufficient base of local support, it demonstrated “that an urban neighborhood could be self-sufficient in the production of food and wealth.”<sup>45</sup>

Having failed to sell alternative technology to a majority of people in a neighborhood, Hess next shifted to an informal project with a distributed membership consisting entirely of self-selected participants who had already bought in to the idea. He and Therese moved to rural West Virginia in 1975. Aside from pouring the foundation, digging the well and bringing in a power line, they did essentially all the construction work on their new home themselves, to a large extent incorporating vernacular materials and passive solar design.<sup>46</sup>

Hess and Therese established the Appropriate Technology Group in 1976, a network serving the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia,

bringing members together on a monthly basis at different homes and at various project sites to share technological information and to help one another with tools, projects, and problems. Our show-and-tell project was our house, its efficient use of energy, and its innovative construction. An array of other projects, ranging from organic cattle farming to building a functioning duplicate of the locally famous James Rumsey steamboat, kept us engaged in a constant process of learning and creating.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Hess, *Dear America*, p. 238.

<sup>45</sup> Hess, *Mostly On the Edge*, p. 237.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 243–245.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

hood; a self-powered platform that would handle most of the neighborhood's heavy moving chores; a neighborhood chemical factory to make household cleaners, disinfectants, insecticides, and aspirin; and a neighborhood methanol plant to take local garbage and turn it into a portable fuel with properties roughly similar to gasoline.<sup>43</sup>

The range of other projects on the AMO's drawing board anticipated later municipalist projects like Cooperation Jackson.

Next on the neighborhood agenda are crime prevention actions (neighborhood patrols, youth programs run by and not for young people, and whatever else the apparently endless ingenuity of the neighbors can come up with). Also, a committee is forming to start a health-training and service center, and a co-op real estate office. There already is an exemplary co-op grocery store, record store, and a video center which uses portable tape machines as a way for people to engage in what amounts to an audiovisual debate about anything and everything that affects their lives.

Also, there is a highly regarded therapeutic community of recovered drug users; a credit union; a community assistance cooperative for Spanish-speaking people; two nonprofit weekly newspapers; a woodworking guild; a prisoner-release program and an "alternatives to prison" program; plans for a co-op pharmacy and for a co-op hardware store; a brilliantly innovative community studies program through Communitas College, also in the neighborhood; volunteer work by Antioch law school students, also in the neighborhood; and a growing feeling that when you say hello

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

time of writing two decades or more later, or of his son's attempt to put Karl Sr.'s notes into chronological order.

In *Dear America*, he states that in the 1968 election year he was already a member of *Students for a Democratic Society*,<sup>6</sup> whose Port Huron Statement he had found congenial — suggesting that the period of political introspection during which his later New Left conversion gestated was already well underway.

Despite his SDS membership, however, the consideration of left-wing ideas would appear to have been mostly subliminal. This is doubly so, considering he agreed to work on Goldwater's Senate campaign (on the condition that he not be required to write in support of the Vietnam War or "law and order" issues).<sup>7</sup>

The beginning of Hess's association with the Institute for Policy Studies is hard to nail down. For one thing, it depends on exactly what we mean by "association." He appears to have gone, over a period of years, from quite informal initial contacts to formal membership.

The introductory material in *Mostly On the Edge* includes a chronology that gives the dates for "Joining the Institute for Policy Studies" as 1968–1970,<sup>8</sup> but it's not clear whether the chronology is Hess's own or his son's attempted reconstruction, or whether 1968–1970 is meant as a range of possible dates.

The internal logic of the actual text seems to suggest an early start to Hess's interaction with the IPS and his interest in the New Left. Milton Kotler, in *Final Impressions*, states: "When I was at the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) in Washington, D.C., Prometheus appeared in 1965 in the person of Karl Hess."

Marc Raskin, IPS director, had learned about this notable 42-year-old figure, who came from the right wing

<sup>6</sup> Karl Hess, *Dear America* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1975), p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 101–102.

<sup>8</sup> Hess, *Mostly On the Edge*, p. 26.

to the left wing in a flash of time after the defeat of Barry Goldwater... in the 1964 election. Marc invited Karl to join us as a visiting fellow...

At the IPS seminars Karl propounded anarchist and libertarian theories and practices, chief of which was his refusal to pay federal income taxes...

Along with others..., Karl and I organized the Adams Morgan Organization (AMO) neighborhood government...<sup>9</sup>

Based on this string of activities ranging almost a decade, in the space of only a page, it's apparent that Kotler is telescoping together events covering a significant stretch of time. So there's no reason to believe that the invitation to join as a visiting fellow or the IPS seminars necessarily came at the same time as Hess's initial contact. And Hess's movement from right to left, while it may have occurred "in a flash," was probably not instantaneous. Nevertheless, we can take this as credible evidence that Hess's communications with the IPS began in 1965.

According to a December 1969 article in *The Washingtonian*, Stephen Hess — an associate fellow at IPS — invited Karl in 1965 to speak as part of "a seminar on the future of the Republican party."<sup>10</sup> And Ken Western, a scholar on Hess, recalls that Marc Raskin "invited Karl to talk about Barry Goldwater and the 1964 presidential campaign" in 1967 or 1968.<sup>11</sup>

Other evidence strongly suggests that until fairly late in the 1960s Hess viewed right-wing anarcho-capitalism as the essentially correct ideology and was interested in the New Left primarily insofar as some aspects of it corresponded with his own

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<sup>9</sup> Milton Kotler, *Final Impressions* (Broad Branch Books, 2018). Kindle edition, pp. 54–55.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Clapp, "The Intellectual Bombthrowers," *The Washingtonian* (December 1969), p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ken Western, personal email, June 28, 2023.

Jeffrey Woodside, our resident physicist and jack-of-all-trades; his immensely energetic friend Esther Siegal; our chemist, Fern Wood Mitchell; and Therese built tanks of fiberglass-covered plywood, arranged water recirculation with pumps from discarded washing machines, and contrived filters for the fish waste made of boxes filled with calcite chips (the standard marble chips sold in garden supply stores) into which a few cups of ordinary vacant-lot soil had been poured to provide a bumptious strain of nitrifying bacteria to feed on the ammonia in the fish waste.

The bacteria kept the water clean, the pumps and some well-placed baffles kept the tank water moving in a strong current, the fish (which we first reared from eggs in ordinary aquarium tanks) swam strongly, ate heartily of the commercial feed that we first used as a convenience, and grew as fast as fish in streams. Surprisingly to us, the rate at which they converted their feed to flesh was better than one ounce of fish for each two ounces of food, about 500 percent more efficient than beef cattle, and as good as that champion barnyard converter, the chicken. Our installation, neatly tailored to urban basements, produced five pounds of fish per cubic foot of water. A typical basement in the neighborhood could produce about three tons annually at costs substantially below grocery store prices.<sup>42</sup>

Other hardware design projects included bacteriological toilets, solar cookers, and passive solar collectors made of discarded cans for interior heating.

The group generally began discussing the design of a shopping cart that could be built in the neighbor-

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

work in association with other cities around the world when their interests are threatened by multinational corporations.<sup>39</sup>

Intercommunal organizations, among other things, could coordinate economic ties between local communities in areas where a function could not be carried out with the resources of individual communities. For example:

From this base we can establish intercommunal links with other countries, villages, neighborhoods, or communes, to begin a dialogue about mutual needs and support. On a domestic scale this outreach might grow out of trade patterns. Trucking cooperatives might begin to make contractual arrangements with co-op food producers in other parts of the region to buy their food in bulk, store it at a central warehouse, and distribute it through buying clubs, collectives, or local, sympathetic businesses. Arrangements could be made with federations of small farmers to pick up their produce on a regular schedule....

These economic links should be combined with communication links. A coal miners' strike can be supported by urban dwellers and vice versa.<sup>40</sup>

The Community Technology project made significant efforts to put many of these ideas into practice.

Attempts at food sovereignty included neighborhood gardens in vacant lots and on rooftops (Adams-Morgan was a neighborhood of mostly three-story row houses with flat roofs).<sup>41</sup> The most ambitious project was a basement trout farm, of which Hess was justifiably proud.

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151–152.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153–154.

<sup>41</sup> Hess, *Community Technology*, p. 28.

right-libertarian positions. And the statement in his autobiography quoted below, that he was “welcomed” at IPS as a “representative of the Old Right,” is further confirmation that even after his active association with him, he continued for some time to view himself as a right-wing ally to the New Left rather than a member.

His active affiliation with IPS as a fellow probably began in 1968. According to Ken Western, the *Washington Post* published Hess's review of Richard Barnet's book *Intervention and Revolution* in January 7, 1969 issue. He was identified as an IPS fellow in the tagline, suggesting that “he was certainly with IPS at least part of 1968.”<sup>12</sup>

Still, it appears quite likely that Hess at that time continued to view himself primarily as an anarcho-capitalist who was participating as a fellow-traveler from a different ideological background. His teaching an antiwar seminar at IPS, also in January 1969, was seen by some as “blowing his cover” as a New Leftist or as a “defection” from the right. But syndicated columnist John Chamberlain argued that it was entirely consistent with Hess's view of himself as an Old Right ally in an antiwar coalition with the New Left.<sup>13</sup>

This is also borne out by Hess's own testimony from the time, in a letter to Paul Krassner's *The Realist* in May 1967, as well as in his article “The Death of Politics” in the March 1969 issue of *Playboy*, both of which reflect fairly standard ancap positions. In the former, he wrote:

I occupy a political position which, I am sure, would be anathema to you, i.e., conservative. But I nevertheless find your publication lively, legitimate and interesting. Also I am curious as to why you have never realized that the conservative (particularly the Goldwater-style) position is basically libertarian,

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<sup>12</sup> Western, personal email.

<sup>13</sup> John Chamberlain, “These Days: Is Conservative Turning to New Left?” *Fort Myers News-Press*, January 17, 1969.

anti-establishment and thus closer to yours than, for instance, that of the institutional socialist.<sup>14</sup>

And in the *Playboy* article, he seemed to identify himself unequivocally as an anarcho-capitalist: “Laissez-faire capitalism, or anarchocapitalism, is simply the economic form of the libertarian ethic.” His condemnations of corporate capitalism were still of the “not real (i.e. laissez-faire) capitalism” and “that’s cronyism/corporatism, not capitalism” variety, all too familiar for observers of the libertarian movement today: “Big business in America today and for some years has been openly at war with competition and, thus, at war with laissez-faire capitalism.”<sup>15</sup>

Hess’s genuinely left-sounding rhetoric only began to emerge during his stint at *Libertarian Forum*, reaching their full extent in his 1975 book *Dear America*.

As already implied, Hess’s period of collaboration with the IPS and the New Left came about through initiatives from the latter side. Mark Raskin and Richard Barnet, founding co-directors of the IPS, approached Hess based on the perceived intersection between the libertarian and decentralist aspects of the New Left with Goldwater’s ideology. They were particularly fascinated by his laissez-faire critique of monopoly capitalism and corporate collusion with the state — features of his politics that had alienated much of the GOP’s old business establishment — and his skepticism toward JFK’s and LBJ’s adventures in Vietnam.<sup>16</sup> They

understood that there had been an Old Right in this country — a faction that was isolationist in foreign policy and supportive of competition rather than privilege in business. I was welcomed to the Institute... as

<sup>14</sup> Karl Hess, “Letter from a Right-winger,” *The Realist* No. 74 (May 1967), p. 2 <<https://www.ep.tc/realist/pdf/the-realist-074.pdf>>.

<sup>15</sup> Karl Hess, “The Death of Politics,” *Playboy*, March 1969. Reproduced at Mises.org <<https://mises.org/library/death-politics>>.

<sup>16</sup> Hess, *Mostly On the Edge*, pp. 183–184.

tiny community. This might come on the bureaucratic level first. Housing inspectors may begin to investigate housing, citing obscure and not-so-obscure sanitary regulations. Health inspectors may begin to give community food stores or restaurants low scores on their reports, forcing investments in new machinery. Police may begin to survey the community very closely, making marijuana arrests, stopping cars, hassling drivers and pedestrians alike. This is the lowest level of harassment and the most common. If the neighborhood has made allies within the city bureaucracy and can deliver votes at election time, it can usually postpone these pressures until it gets on its feet. But — and it is important not to forget — this can only be postponed until the neighborhood gets on its feet. As it begins to sever its relations with major economic interests, and builds its own wealth, the votes it delivers may not be as important as the money that the economic interests can deliver in the municipal arena.<sup>38</sup>

Once cities begin to move against national economic or political interests..., they too will be caught up in the sort of dilemma that neighborhoods face, one of tackling organizations infinitely more powerful than themselves....

Rather than continually moving up the political ladder, we suggest that cities have quite enough resources to deal with most issues, and that they should begin interconnecting with other cities, just as neighborhoods have done, when they are fighting major interest groups. Cities do have the wherewithal to develop their own worldwide communications networks. They can develop their own industries, and

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

We been using too many inches, and there's just no more to go around.”<sup>36</sup>

In addition to the creation of neighborhood industry and other economic institutions, social services, and organs of self-governance, Hess and Morris advocated “intercommunalism” — horizontal networks between local self-governing communities, as a way of bypassing the authority of the nation-state — in a way that anticipated federative projects of the new municipalist movement today.

There is... another dynamic at work, one that becomes increasingly powerful as time goes by. That is an outward movement, interconnecting many communities in the cities and even the world. It is a natural and almost inevitable tendency. While there are many who try to build citizenship into the neighborhood itself, there are others who try to build strong links among many communities, reinforcing each other in their struggles.<sup>37</sup>

Intercommunal cooperation is necessary, among other reasons — as we've seen with recent actions by the Mississippi legislature against Cooperation Jackson, etc. — because of the potential for repression of isolated communities by central governments.

As the neighborhood, or neighborhoods, actually become effective political units — as they begin to attain an image as actually threatening to corporate profits, or entrenched political interests, or real-estate developers, or rich people — very powerful machinery of the state and its allies will be brought to bear on the

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 154–155.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

a representative of that Old Right who could engage in fruitful dialogue with the New Left.<sup>17</sup>

(Well, to be more exact, the Old Right was for the most part unilateralist in foreign policy and favored America's traditional Empire in Latin America and the Pacific Rim, and represented the National Association of Manufacturers faction of capital — predominantly medium-sized, labor-intensive enterprises — with their own very real forms of privilege.)

Hess found the New Left attractive from his Old Right standpoint because of its orientation “toward neighborhoods, toward localism, and away from central bureaucracies.” His involvement came during the period in which the New Left was characterized by a “thrust toward decentralism, community, and small-scale organization,” before so many of its leading organizations like SDS were taken over by Maoists.<sup>18</sup>

His New Left period included several months in 1969 as Washington Editor and contributor at Rothbard's *Libertarian Forum*.<sup>19</sup> This collaboration was during Rothbard's own period of closest amity with the New Left — a period that ended sooner, with a sharper break, and followed by a much further drift to the right, than was later to be the case with Hess.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>19</sup> Riggerbach, “Karl Hess and the Death of Politics.”

## II. Shift to the Left

As Jeff Riggensbach put it — in terms that make it clear he regarded the phase as an unfortunate one — Hess’s continuing leftward shift soon went too far for Rothbard. By 1972,

his steady drift leftward had brought him to the parting of the ways with Rothbard.

The Karl Hess of the early 1970s was most often found attired in fatigues, a field jacket, and combat boots. He rode a motorcycle. He gave up his affiliation with the right-wing American Enterprise Institute for an affiliation with the leftwing Institute for Policy Studies. He joined Students for a Democratic Society. He learned welding, worked professionally as a welder, and joined the Wobblies — the IWW, the Industrial Workers of the World. He hung out with the Black Panthers. He started talking about “community” and about the concerns of “workers” and about the ways in which giant corporations, and the corporate lifestyle and the corporate mindset, menace and victimize ordinary, hard-working Americans.

His 1975 book, *Dear America*, is full of this sort of vaguely New Leftish stuff, intermixed with passages of pure Rothbardian libertarianism. Hess’s decade or so on the left had a profound influence on the remainder of his life — how he lived, how he thought. But in the end, as it turned out, the left was just one more way station on his road back to the ideological home he

In the food sector we might start with the retail collectives, then add trucking distribution networks and warehouse storage areas. Later some food could be raised directly in the community. A canning factory might be set up to teach people to gain the advantage of low-priced fruits and vegetables in season all year round, by buying during the summer and eating during the winter. Finally, a glass recycling unit might be set up, at first to trade broken bottles for usable jars on an arrangement with the bottling companies, later possibly to produce the jars themselves.<sup>35</sup>

Besides all this Morris and Hess speculated on forms of currency that simply served as units of account for coordinating flows of goods between producers, rather than being issued against stockpiled wealth. They quoted Alan Watts:

Remember the Great Depression of the Thirties? One day there was a flourishing consumer economy, with everyone on the up-and-up; and the next: poverty, unemployment and breadlines. What happened? The physical resources of the country — the brain, brawn, and raw materials — were in no way depleted, but there was a sudden absence of money, a so-called financial slump. Complex reasons for this kind of disaster can be elaborated at lengths by experts in banking and high finance who cannot see the forest for the trees. But it was just as if someone had come to work on building a house and, on the morning of the Depression, the boss had to say, “Sorry, baby, but we can’t build today. No inches.” “Whaddya mean, no inches? We got wood. We got metal. We even got tape measures.” “Yeah, but you don’t understand business.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 142–143.



Would community-controlled real estate firms help ease the problems of runaway speculation?<sup>31</sup>

—Do unused properties, held for speculation, present a clear and present danger to town survival and stability? If they do, if space is wasted for the profit of people who may not even live in the town, or if the future of the many is balanced dangerously on the speculation of a few, the community might want to consider, for example, new programs of urban homesteading, with unused properties being returned to productive and locally needed use by people in the actual neighborhoods involved.<sup>32</sup>

Morris' and Hess's model by which "repair shops begin to transform themselves into basic manufacturing facilities"<sup>33</sup> was virtually identical to Jane Jacobs' description of import substitution in the Japanese bicycle industry. In fact they actually used bicycles as an illustration:

It is best, perhaps, to move gradually from one step in the production process to another. A bicycle collective might be established on the retail level. Then maintenance facilities might be added. After a number of people have learned the skills in repairs in a neighborhood, a factory could be initiated to produce a few vital parts, like chains or wheels or tires. Finally, if the need arises, full-scale production of bicycles could be attempted.<sup>34</sup>

They also suggested gradually filling in gaps in the supply chains of existing industries.

<sup>31</sup> Hess, *Dear America*, p. 274.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>33</sup> Morris and Hess, *Neighborhood Power*, p. 69.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

had found in the '60s and then had drifted away from, for what had seemed like good reasons at the time, but had turned out to be illusory, insubstantial.

By the mid '80s, he was, as Lennon and McCartney might say, back to where he once belonged.<sup>1</sup>

And reading Hess's writing even in *Libertarian Forum* — let alone the anticapitalist rhetoric in his 1975 manifesto *Dear America* — one can understand how a libertarian of the American pro-capitalist type might be affronted. At the height of his New Left period, he was as hostile to his earlier Old Right affiliations of the 1950s and early 1960s as he later became toward leftism; he went so far as to describe his role in that period as "a paid hand for major capitalist interests."<sup>2</sup>

In the first few issues of *Libertarian Forum*, Hess stuck to safe, tried and true libertarian themes in his "Letter From Washington" column, like domestic police repression and taxes. Rothbard was actually more radical in his positive comments regarding the student revolution and the Black Panthers. In fact Hess's first mention of the campus radicals and Panthers, in the June 1, 1969 issue, was almost entirely a denunciation of the domestic police apparatus for going after them rather than a commentary on any aspect of their actual politics.<sup>3</sup>

His first real venture into radical commentary appeared in the next issue, alongside Rothbard's more radical article "Confiscation and the Homestead Principle." In "Where Are The Specifics?" Hess, albeit in more moderate terms than Rothbard's in the same issue, addressed — among other things — justice in property acquisition and the issue of reparations.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* Actually, as we will see, Hess's position at *Libertarian Forum* came to a *de facto* end in November 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Hess, *Dear America*, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Hess, "Letter From Washington: The Coming White Terror," *Libertarian Forum*, Vol. 1 No. 5 (June 1, 1969), pp. 2–3.

Because so many of its people... have come from the right there remains about it at least an aura or, perhaps, miasma of defensiveness, as though its interests really center in, for instance, defending private property. The truth, of course, is that libertarianism wants to advance principles of property but that it in no way wishes to defend, willy nilly, all property which now is called private.

Much of that property is stolen. Much is of dubious title. All of it is deeply intertwined with an immoral, coercive state system which has condoned, built on, and profited from slavery; has expanded through and exploited a brutal and aggressive imperial and colonial foreign policy, and continues to hold the people in a roughly serf-master relationship to political-economic power concentrations....

This is a far cry from sharing common ground with those who want to create a society in which super capitalists are free to amass vast holdings and who say that that is ultimately the most important purpose of freedom. This is proto-heroic nonsense.

Libertarianism is a people's movement and a liberation movement. It seeks the sort of open, non-coercive society in which the people, the living, free, distinct people may voluntarily associate, dis-associate, and, as they see fit, participate in the decisions affecting their lives. This means a truly free market in everything from ideas to idiosyncrasies. It means people free collectively to organize the resources of their immediate community or individualistically to organize them; it means the freedom to have a community-based and supported judiciary where wanted, none where not, or private arbitration services where that is seen as

The shared warehouse... should collect a trove of bits and pieces of building materials, no matter whether in the inner city or in a rural area or small town. There always seems to be a bundle of wood at the end of any project that is too good to burn, too junky to sell, and too insignificant to store. Put a lot of those bundles together and the picture changes to more and more practical possibilities of building materials for the public space.

Spare parts are fair game for the community warehouse. Thus it can serve as a parts cabinet for the community technology experimenters.<sup>30</sup>

The general principle of import substitution also included vernacular construction techniques using locally available materials, what today would be called cohousing or land trusts, and — a position which would doubtless horrify any mainstream right-libertarian today — squatting or community expropriation of the unused properties of absentee owners.

—And new and better ways to build. Traditional housing codes and techniques have led to waves of so-called urban renewal or, in many cases, urban dislocation. But many townspeople have begun to wonder if just tearing down part of a town is real progress after all. Making better use of existing housing is an alternative. A community study could be made to show how. And would the community be better served by a system of community-controlled, perhaps individual neighborhood housing plans than by large-scale plans often drawn by outsiders? What good or bad effects would there be to the use of innovative rather than traditional building techniques?

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<sup>30</sup> Hess, *Community Technology*, pp. 59–60.

neighborhood and whose mysteries might be an important part in the feeling of helplessness that many inner-city people develop....

...[T]here might be similar projects that the machine shop could undertake beyond the building of demonstration models and other regular community technology tasks. The machine shop could regularly redesign cast-off items into useful ones. Discarded refrigerators, for instance, suggest an infinity of new uses, from fish tanks, after removing doors, to numerous small parts as each discarded one is stripped for its components, which include small compressors, copper tubing, heat transfer arrays, and so on. The same goes for washing machines. In small towns a nice bonus of recycling such things is that the local landfill or other disposal project doesn't have the problem of disposing of these relatively large hunks of junk; and that's all they are unless given a new life by the community technologists!

Similar in spirit to the shared machine shop could be a shared warehouse. Everyone knows the agony of having to throw something away even though instinct says that someday it will be needed. But space does us all in – apartment dwellers immediately, homesteaders finally.

A community decision to share a space in which discarded materials can be stored, categorized, and made easily available is a decision to use an otherwise wasted resource, to be ingenious, and to take back into the hands of the community an active role in making decisions about industrial processes....

most desirable. The same with police. The same with schools, hospitals, factories, farms, laboratories, parks, and pensions. Liberty means the right to shape your own institutions. It opposes the right of those institutions to shape you simply because of accreted power or gerontological status....

Libertarians could and should propose specific revolutionary tactics and goals which would have specific meaning to poor people and to all people; to analyze in depth and to demonstrate in example the meaning of liberty, revolutionary liberty to them....

The proposals should take into account the revolutionary treatment of stolen 'private' and 'public' property in libertarian, radical, and revolutionary terms; the factors which have oppressed people so far, and so forth....

– Land ownership and/or usage in a situation of declining state power. The Tijerina situation suggests one approach. There must be many others. And what about (realistically, not romantically) water and air pollution liability and prevention?

– Worker, share-owner, community roles or rights in productive facilities in terms of libertarian analysis and as specific proposals in a radical and revolutionary context. What, for instance, might or should happen to General Motors in a liberated society? Of particular interest, to me at any rate, is focusing libertarian analysis and ingenuity on finishing the great unfinished business of the abolition of slavery. Simply setting slaves free, in a world still owned by their masters, obviously was an historic inequity.... Thoughts of reparations today are clouded by concern

that it would be taken out against innocent persons who in no way could be connected to former oppression. There is an area where that could be avoided: in the use of government-‘owned’ lands and facilities as items of exchange in compensating the descendants of slaves and making it possible for them to participate in the communities of the land, finally, as equals and not wards.<sup>4</sup>

He further developed this commentary on the right’s reflexive defense of “property” in the November 1 issue, observing that conservatives excoriate the Robin Hood legend mainly because, from their perspective, “the mere fact of *having* riches is the only standard against which to judge the theft of those riches.”

In short, the conservative notion is that to steal anything from anybody is a crime — regardless of the source of the thing being ripped off or the nature of the owner’s position in regard to the society in general....

...It is possible that the specter of Robin Hood today haunts so many conservative dreams not because of their pure thoughts on property rights so much as be-

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Hess, “Letter From Washington: Where Are The Specifics?” *Libertarian Forum* Vol. 1 No. 6 (June 15, 1969), p. 2. The “Tijerina situation” referred to an attempt by activist Reies Tijerina to occupy and reclaim the New Mexican land grants by the descendants of the original Spanish and Mexican settlers. “Reies Tijerina,” *Wikipedia* <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reies\\_Tijerina](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reies_Tijerina)>. Accessed June 27, 2023. Rothbard’s own “Confiscation and the Homestead Principle” article is today itself a scandal among many on the libertarian right. As the Mises Institute paleocons never tire of informing me, Rothbard later repudiated his views on expropriating corporate property. And so he did, to be sure — just as he also repudiated most shreds of decency in his later paleo years, when he took up residence in the same septic tank as Ron Paul and Lew Rockwell.

—Community federations of self-support and assistance can be formed. This is a possibility that might grow out of the steps already mentioned. If one community chooses to support its own survivability by community-owned and -operated productive facilities, it might be reasonable to assume that others will follow suit — and that trade between those self-supporting community enterprises would be a natural development which could lead to actual regional federations of such community work.<sup>29</sup>

The development of community productive facilities to facilitate import substitution, he suggested, should include a community machine shop and warehouse.

The machine shop should have enough basic tools, both hand and power, to make the building of demonstration models or test facilities a practical and everyday activity. The shared shop might just be part of some other public facility, used in its off-hours. Or the shop might be separate and stocked with cast-off industrial tools, with tools bought from government surplus through the local school system. Or a community technology group might just go ahead and do it themselves. Work can, of course, be done as well in home shops or in commercial shops of people who like the community technology approach. Results should be fine, but the participants would miss the creative challenge of the shared shop....

Thinking of such a shared workshop in an inner city, you can think of its use also for the maintenance of appliances and other household goods whose replacement might represent a real economic burden in the

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<sup>29</sup> Hess, *Dear America*, pp. 271–272.

The first step might be the use of neighborhood communications media to bring together people interested in organizing low-overhead services like hot lunches, daycare, bulk food-buying cooperatives, and the like.<sup>28</sup>

The next step would be more capital-intensive operations, like brick-and-mortar retailers and local industry.

—The threatened closing of a key business or industry is a crucial, even fatal, time for many a town. Does the town have to accept the closing and suffer the consequences or can it act in its own best interest, legally, to do something about it? The subject is wide open for imaginative study. The right of eminent domain, used so often to acquire property for traditional public use, could be explored as a possibility to acquire actual productive facilities whose loss would cripple the town.

—Community ownership of productive facilities can be considered. This process is familiar when it comes to such things as recreation areas, water supply, even some power companies. Could and should the community expand that concept to other areas to sustain its survival?

—Community development of new productive facilities to enhance the self-reliance and the survivability of the town can be considered. Many communities are familiar with the process of a tax-supported industrial site being offered to an outside business to bring them in. Might the town be better served by going one important step beyond the traditional process and studying the possibility of a publicly-owned production *facility* as well as a publicly-supported *site*?

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33–35.

cause of the possibly impure origins of the property dearest to their own hearts.<sup>5</sup>

As he continued to find his voice, Hess referred scathingly to the bulk of right-wing support for libertarianism as “almost exclusively toward the institutionalization of a currently vested interest (i.e. anti-Communism, corporate protectionism, class or race privilege, religion) rather than in the development of a new movement.”<sup>6</sup>

And in the September 1 issue, he called into question the right-libertarian core distinction between government and business, at least in the case of the corporate economy:

Corporations in no way present a countervailing force to the state. They are, in effect, licensed by the state, they are treated in special ways (i.e. as though no one in them had any individual responsibility) by the state, taxed in special ways by the state, and so forth. They are either simply economic arms of the state or, to put it in another way, the state is simply the police arm of the corporations. Under the American system of state capitalism, as under the similar system in the Soviet Union, that’s just the way it is.<sup>7</sup>

By the late fall of 1969, there were signs of a growing split between Rothbard and Hess. Rothbard’s leading article “Ultra-Leftism” in the November 15 issue denounced the SDS for its “Marxian New Left” emphasis on the working class and “student

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Hess, “Letter From Washington: Robin Hood Revisionism,” *Libertarian Forum* Vol. 1 No. 15 (November 1, 1969), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Hess, “Letter From Washington: What The Movement Needs,” *Libertarian Forum* Vol. 1 No. 7 (July 1, 1969), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Hess, “Letter From Washington: Reform,” *Libertarian Forum* Vol. 1 No. 11 (September 1, 1969), p. 2.

lumpen” as agents of revolution rather than on the broad, tax-paying middle class, and for having, “in the past year, ...become largely Stalinoid” — and as a result “rapidly disintegrating.” He argued for a “division of labor” in which libertarians would leave the campus radicals to SDS and themselves concentrate on the middle class; and, accordingly, eschew the hippie aesthetic in order to avoid offending the Silent Majority’s cultural values.<sup>8</sup>

A month later Hess, while making clear his disagreement with Rothbard, denied any personal rift between them and did his best to downplay the significance of the issue (albeit with somewhat of a passive-aggressive “who died and made you boss?” subtext).

In the existential struggle between liberty and authority there also are many rooms, indeed, a thousand flowers bloom on either side of the dividing line.

My own summary of the matter is known as The Oink Principle. It states that if it oinks it is your enemy. If it does not oink it may not be your best friend but it is, at least, not your enemy.

I have consulted lately with my very dear friend, Murray Rothbard, on this matter and he tells me that although he will continue to criticize my, and others’, left wing adventurism, that he has not detected a single oink from my room. I have not, in turn, heard any such sound from his.

There are others, however, who may take Murray’s criticisms as some sort of anathema being pronounced upon them. They may mistake simple criticism for lethal exclusionism. This strikes me as a needless reaction. There are many anarchists who hold, for instance, that not even God is god. Why should they

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<sup>8</sup> Murray Rothbard, “ULTRA-LEFTISM,” *Libertarian Forum* Vol. 1 No. 16 (November 15, 1969), pp. 1–2.

teaching skills to school classes. The public library’s main resource is a trained ability to help in working out information retrieval systems and perhaps even providing space for information storage.<sup>26</sup>

Resource mapping also includes the use of bulletin boards, neighborhood newspapers, and electronic means of communication to inform neighborhood residents of the outside interests exercising power over them.

On a different level, residents rarely know who owns their neighborhood. Does one corporation own most of the commercial property? Has land changed hands over the past year or two, indicating that speculators are moving in? What are the current sales prices of houses?

Or, on another level, what are the housing codes? What are the regulations concerning tenant unions? Can someone complain to a landlord about rats in the basement without fearing eviction?...

Finally, what events looming on the horizon can affect the neighborhood? Is someone planning to build a highway through its center? Is a subway stop going to be put in the neighborhood? Is the local school or clinic closing down?<sup>27</sup>

Once both the available resources and the bottlenecks and dependencies of the local economy were identified, community mapping would be followed by Jane Jacobs’ model of import substitution.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>27</sup> Morris and Hess, *Neighborhood Power*, p. 26.

situation of the town, overall, not just in terms of isolated businesses, interests, or instances?<sup>24</sup>

A community skill-resource inventory should be useful. It would involve a systematic door-to-door canvassing of the entire community (the way a dedicated church goes about it, for instance) to discover what social and tutorial skills are held by people in the community. At the same time you could raise the question of the extent to which the people are willing to commit those skills to community projects.<sup>25</sup>

Such community mapping should include the resources of local government and the public schools.

Road repair and building equipment represents a powerhouse of tools. The community technology group anxious to study shared or community heat-storage facilities or to build a demonstration earth-insulated house could find vital tools in the town garage. In urban neighborhoods there are also possibilities with city equipment, using some, for instance, to bulldoze lots for community gardens, or borrowing help from the fire department to mount a rooftop collector...

It is possible that the school systems and libraries will have concentrations of tools to make the community technologist leap with joy. School labs do have equipment that, if the community technology group can share in paying for, might be used on a community basis after school hours. On the other hand, there may be instances where a community technology proposal and its exploration might itself be a superb way of

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<sup>24</sup> Hess, *Dear America*, p. 271.

<sup>25</sup> Hess, *Community Technology*, p. 57.

make the mistake of thinking that Rothbard is? He is a comrade, not a deity; a brilliant economist, not a burning bush; a revolutionary theorist, not an executioner.

It is clear by my actions, I am sure, that I do not agree with a substantial portion of Murray's recent criticism. I even disagree with the emphasis upon criticism itself which seems to have overtaken him. I would prefer, and hopefully expect, that his talents would be turned more to analysis of the political situation generally rather than to the personalities of our part of it in particular. Having even said that, however, I must admit that his latest criticisms of left wing adventurism, which did contain pointed comments about many of us, also contained a thoughtful commentary upon the possibilities of politicizing liberals. I am, as a matter of fact, in close and regular contact with several of the other adventurists criticized in Murray's commentary. Neither they nor I feel personally offended at all by what he had to say.

We simply disagree.

We say, in effect, "Well, that's Murray." We expect that, when all is said and done, Murray, similarly, will sigh and say, Well, that's them..."

...It is to say that when Rothbard rumbles all need not quake and similarly it is to say that Rothbard, rumbling, should realize that for many who feel him as their mentor it is difficult to resist an over-reaction.<sup>9</sup>

This response by Hess was followed, in rapid fire succession, by Rothbard's denunciation of the economic errors of anarcho-

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<sup>9</sup> Karl Hess, "Letter From Washington: Cults and Criticisms," *Libertarian Forum* Vol. 1 No. 18 (November 15, 1969), p. 2.

communism (quoting Ortega y Gasset, no less) in the January 1, 1970 issue,<sup>10</sup> “The New Left, RIP” in March,<sup>11</sup> a commentary on the “Looney Left” in April,<sup>12</sup> and a “Farewell to the Left” in May.<sup>13</sup> Hess continued to be listed on the masthead as “Washington Editor” through the April 15 issue; but the eirenic gestures in his column of the previous November notwithstanding, it was the last column of his published in *Libertarian Forum*. As it turned out, Rothbard apparently *did* feel that all need quake when he rumbled.

Hess’s period of active experimentation with leftist ideas, just getting underway in his bare eight months at *Libertarian Forum*, had reached full maturity by 1975 with the publication of *Dear America*. At the outset, he condemned the anti-libertarian nature of both corporate capitalism and state socialism in virtually identical terms.

What I have learned about corporate capitalism, roughly, is that it is an act of theft, by and large, through which a very few live very high off the work, invention, and creativity of very many others. It is the Grand Larceny of our particular time in history, the Grand Larceny in which a future of freedom which could have followed the collapse of feudalism was stolen from under our noses by a new bunch of bosses doing the same old things.

What I have learned about state socialism, roughly, is that it is an act of betrayal through which aspirations

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<sup>10</sup> Murray Rothbard, “Anarcho-Communism,” *Libertarian Forum* Vol. 2 No. 1 (January 1, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Murray Rothbard, “The New Left, RIP,” *Libertarian Forum* Vol. 2 No. 6 (March 15, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Rothbard, “THE MAD BOMBERS,” *Libertarian Forum* Vol. 2 No. 7 (April 1, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Rothbard, “Farewell To The Left,” *Libertarian Forum* Vol. 2 No. 9 (May 1, 1970), p. 1.

of its commerce, and, second, the discrepancy between the considerable tax revenue the neighborhood generates and the low level of benefits it receives in public services and welfare. In both cases the neighborhood exports its income .... Its present internal commerce is dependent, as is its level of public services, on commerce and personnel outside the neighborhood.<sup>23</sup>

As a program for implementing the vision of a relocalized economy, Hess recommended starting from something very much like the “community resource mapping” described by more recent municipalist thinkers like J.K. Gibson-Graham and others.

—A community survey of the patterns of ownership in your town. Who owns the property? Local people? Out-of-towners? Financial institutions? It makes a difference, but few towns have ever bothered to study it closely.

—A tax study. Where does the tax money go? What is the full flow of public money into the community and out of the community? Many a town has been astonished to discover that more goes out than ever comes in, in terms of public money actually locatable in the town.

—A study of the real economy of the town. What jobs are there? What jobs were there? What is produced, by which people, on what machines or from what resources, and, most importantly, for whose profit and security?

—The material base of the community. Where does the food come from? The energy? Building materials, other raw materials? In short, what is the material

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<sup>23</sup> Kotler, *Neighborhood Government*, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 48.



of the neighborhood by what amounts to a comprador bourgeoisie, it is necessary.

Our neighborhoods are tiny, underdeveloped nations. They are owned, by and large, by outsiders who view them as profitable investments. Local money is put into financial institutions which invest it outside the local economy, often in competing industries....

The neighborhood, or little country if we follow that analogy, exports labor-intensive services and imports capital-intensive finished goods, paying out high prices for a technology generally unsuited to local conditions. There is little domestic industry and, where it does exist, it is supplied by foreign firms. The neighborhood is a net importer of goods and services, is always in debt, and, if it is a recognized political unit, keeps its head above water by taxing domestic businesses and residents' income, usually through regressive taxes, in order to maintain an inadequate welfare system.

Many neighborhoods are divided. Some people are rich and are allied with the foreign interests, often as minor partners. The middle class work as managers in the foreigners' firms, and try desperately to conform to the values of the upper class.<sup>22</sup>

The neighborhood has immense flows of capital and tax revenue — most of it flowing outward. As Milton Kotler put it:

The important features of a poor neighborhood are, first, the discrepancy between the aggregate expendable income of the neighborhood and the paltry level

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<sup>22</sup> David Morris and Karl Hess, *Neighborhood Power: The New Localism*. Institute for Policy Studies (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), pp. 16–17.

for a humane and cooperative way of living together and in peace are sacrificed to or stolen by bureaucrats who have contrived a new synthesis of capitalism's obsessive bookkeeping with feudalism's top-down, absolute authority. It seems the worst of all possible worlds, a mirror image of corporate capitalism, reflecting the same ultimate purpose: to produce a social order in which docile, carefully taught people follow, without whimper or shout, the commands of a ruling class.<sup>14</sup>

...[S]o long as a class of owners controls industry, whether that class is the moneyed plutocracy of America or the political oligarchy in the Soviet Union, then the people generally will be extensions of the machines, extensions of the ledger, and not truly human at all in the eyes of the owners.<sup>15</sup>

His critique focused on the centralization, hierarchy, artificial complexity, and all-around undemocratic nature of their organizational styles.

We hear that the reason we cannot control our own lives is that “society” is just too big and too complex for that. It must be “run.” We can't do it...

Common sense could view it this way: If, indeed, society is too big and too complex for people generally to control it..., then maybe it is too big and too complex.

The commonsense alternative would be: Make it smaller. Make it less complex. Return to people, in the process, the practical possibility of controlling their own lives....<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Hess, *Dear America*, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

The corporate managerial class, as much as the political class, was largely parasitic and unproductive, engaged in what David Graeber would later call “bullshit jobs.”

The bosses are far from being all political. Men who work in factories know that there are bosses, administrative bosses, who do nothing in a specifically productive sense. They do not enhance the product. They do not make it or design it, or even sell it. They have two functions: to maximize profits — by any means possible — and to manipulate people, as one way of doing that other, primary job, but also as a way, simply, to justify their own existence.

Recent and ongoing industrial experience has shown, however, that bosses are not only nonproductive but actually may be counterproductive. Certain factories have turned the job of scheduling shifts and performance over to the logical persons, the ones involved. The result has been better work all around. Leaders, bosses, simply are not needed to tell people how to do things that they, the people, are obviously competent to do because they are the ones who must perform in those things.<sup>17</sup>

Hess compared the attitudes of both conservatives and liberals in America on the subjects of work and welfare, and found them similarly focused on control and disempowerment.

Conservatives often say that they *want* welfare recipients to work. But what they want is merely menial service, people willing to be the servants of the well-to-do. They do not want work to mean the sort

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Computers, of course, have made the storage and retrieval of information a matter of the most drastically reduced scale. They are adaptable also to local manufacture. They are perfectly suited to neighborhood use. Used in neighborhoods, with local familiarity and control, the computer might be seen as more of a tool than a weapon.

Even the problem of traditional information, exemplified in the library, is solvable in a way most compatible with neighborhood scale. Microfiche readers of great sophistication, but happily of reasonably straightforward and small-scale manufacturing technique, mean that the entire contents of the Library of Congress can be stored in a small office space, taking up no more room than the pet food section of a supermarket.<sup>21</sup>

Since then Moore’s Law and the fiber optic network, of course, have left most of these proposals far behind. That’s especially true of microfiche. Twenty years ago, in *The Star Fraction*, Ken MacLeod was already writing about CD-Roms containing the entire Library of Congress in the near future. Today I estimate I can find over 95% of the scholarly books and journal articles I need online via Library Genesis and Science Hub, and most popular fiction in print through either Library Genesis or Anna’s Archive. The same is true of communications. Community bulletin boards were already a thing in the 1990s. And while ham radio and CB may be of great use in catastrophic emergencies when fiber optic networks are shut down, the rest of the time networked communication via the Internet has made them largely obsolete.

A great deal of relocalization is not only feasible; given the colonial nature of the neighborhood economy in relation to outside capital, the extractive nature of the latter, and the internal domination

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<sup>21</sup> Hess, *Community Technology*, pp. 22–23.

patient care problems..., with perhaps regional facilities for more complex treatments requiring machines costly to duplicate. But of course, jurisdictional jealousies would have to be replaced by broad cooperation.”<sup>20</sup>

Nowhere has the potential for small-scale organization left Hess’s predictions so far behind as in the case of communications.

Communications and information systems are already involved in technologies which are adaptable without any question to the most localized uses. Virtually every neighborhood in America has within it amateur communications technicians of reasonably high skill: ham radio operators. Citizen-band radios further democratize the use of radio communications. Further, the very scale of the neighborhood makes it adaptable to communications of the most traditional kind – bulletin boards, wall posters, signs, even town criers or sound trucks. Newspapers on a community scale can be produced in small spaces and with wise recycling of materials or even substitutions of materials (for instance, material that can be quickly erased and re-used) or they can be in electronic forms. Even the raw materials for print media could be held fairly close to the possibilities of neighborhood self-sufficiency and responsibility. The point is not that a neighborhood would thus close itself off from all other communications. The point is simply that the neighborhood can have internal communications sufficient to a fully developed politics of internal freedom and could thereafter enjoy any extended communications with a world of other communities that might be desired.

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<sup>20</sup> Hess, *Dear America*, p. 260.

of independence that will be discussed throughout this book: the work of self-managing people. Liberals, on the other hand, don’t want welfare recipients to work. They want them to be clients of their liberal programs, programs which depend upon retaining a constituency of dependent poor rather than upon encouraging independent and therefore quite probably anti-liberal, self-managing workers.<sup>18</sup>

In place of managerial authoritarianism, he called for a “new age of fully participatory social organization, of control of production by those who produce, of mutual aid..., of privilege ended and responsibility begun..., of self-management.”<sup>19</sup>

In his critique of managerialism, Hess anticipated Cory Doctorow’s concept of “enshittification” – the process by which venture capitalists, private equity and the financial sector hollow out actual productive capability, degrade quality, and either hinder technological development or divert it into trivial or purely cosmetic channels. “With fewer people actually competent to design, repair and build tools, every managerial mistake has more lasting effects, waste becomes less tolerable, and real innovations less likely.”<sup>20</sup> I write this, incidentally, less than a week after the implosion of the OceanGate *Titan* craft and loss of its crew, owing to design decisions by cowboy capitalist adherents of the “move fast and break things” philosophy.

At the same time, as points of failure proliferate within the system, its mechanisms for coping with failure become more and more brittle.

The vitality to sustain a truly productive and innovative system is draining away. And it is draining away

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 213–214.

at the most crucial time. It is draining away when all of the easy supports for production such as cheap fuel, unlimited access to raw materials and a totally dedicated work force are also draining away....

...As the problems multiply, the institutions to deal with them shrink in number but spread vastly in scope, so that fewer rather than more people are “officially” involved in the solutions. Common sense, on the other hand, would surely suggest that with more problems you might need more and not fewer solvers, more and not less skill, and more not fewer willing hands.<sup>21</sup>

Hess also echoed a principle, variously known as the second watershed or counterproductivity, formulated by Ivan Illich.<sup>22</sup>

The cities are falling apart. Nothing works in them. Crime goes up and so does the police budget. The police can't protect. Transportation declines and the highway budget goes up. The roads can't deliver, they can only congest. Kids seem to get dumber but the school budgets stay high. Schools can't educate — at best they candidly try to pacify.<sup>23</sup>

Hess took another position anathema to mainstream right-libertarianism, in acknowledging the existence not only of political power but of “concentrated economic power — power that is concentrated in close collusion with state power at every step of the way.” The failure to confront economic power was “a contradiction

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 214–215.

<sup>22</sup> Kevin A. Carson, *The Thought of Ivan Illich: A Libertarian Analysis* (Center for a Stateless Society, 2023) <<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1FABeJ8kq-b17BbNYA1vh64HgKXvSuZsF/view>>, pp. 3–4.

<sup>23</sup> Hess, *Dear America*, p. 236.

ideally suited to electric vehicles. These vehicles in turn are simply built and also quite adaptable to the most localized production facilities. General Motors boasts that its Basic Transportation Vehicle can be built in a space the size of a barn and for a total capital investment of \$50,000. Run by an electric rather than internal combustion engine, the BTV, or something like it, could serve most of the transportation needs of any American neighborhood. It could also be built there....

Health care, on the other hand, seems far more complicated, and the current tendency to destroy small facilities in favor of huge teaching-hospital empires might appear an argument against any consideration of locally based health care. At the same time, however, the common-sense emphasis on paramedical personnel to handle perhaps a majority of everyday health problems and the equally common-sense emphasis on citizen health awareness show a movement as strikingly toward localization as the more publicized movement toward megamedical centers. Although it is true that exotic ailments might not be treated in good style in a local medical facility, it is also true that most people do not require such service and that to distort an entire technology for the least rather than for the greatest needs seems a questionable practice.

Simply reinstating the practice of house calls by physicians would, probably, eliminate the need for a majority of today's centralized medical facilities.<sup>19</sup>

In the field of healthcare, large-scale hospitals “could be imagined alternatively as smaller, more localized facilities for most

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22.

production....” But they can be obtained by trade or federative relationships with the “neighborhoods” — arguably an anticipation of Elinor Ostrom’s natural resource commons — that produce the resources.

If the raw materials are forever consigned to central buyers or to central governments, then their use as neighborhood resources will remain also at a far remove. There is no technically compelling reason, however, that the neighborhoods that produce raw materials could not trade those raw materials more directly with neighborhood refining facilities or with facilities maintained by groups of neighborhoods.

Energy production is strikingly adaptable to neighborhood scale. Solar energy, economically collectable as heat, could provide at least half of the cooling and heating requirements of any inner-city neighborhood. Photovoltaic cells that directly convert solar to electrical energy are on the verge of manufacturing breakthroughs that could make them the cheapest, most decentralizing power source yet.<sup>18</sup>

Again, Hess’s most euphoric predictions in the 1970s seem dated now. Photovoltaic power has cheapened to the point that it recently became less expensive than coal, and its generation capacity is doubling every year or two.

Transportation within neighborhoods generally is seen as merely an extension of the transportation demands not of citizens but of corporations. Yet the two demands are different. Corporate transportation need not occupy the total travel space of a neighborhood. Most citizen travel is of short duration and is

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<sup>18</sup> Hess, *Community Technology*, p. 21.

that absolutely haunts the entire conservative position<sup>24</sup> — and by implication also the libertarian right.

In the political theory of the life I had led, the abilities of people to control their own lives were seen as sharply divided. On the one hand people were said to have enough sense to run their lives without the interference of a lot of government bureaucrats. But on the other hand they were not seen as able to govern their lives without a lot of corporate bosses.<sup>25</sup>

For Hess, the absorption of small businesses by national oligopoly corporations and franchise chains was just another form of nationalization, in which the bureaucrats were corporate instead of state.<sup>26</sup>

It’s important to note that, in his migration to the left, Hess went straight to the actual left, which he distinguished from the kind of “squishy liberalism” that “always supports corporate power with government regulation and establishes new programmatic ways to regiment the population, and particularly the poor, into totally dependent federal constituencies.”<sup>27</sup> As he proudly stated after his return to the right, “I have participated in most of the major cultural and political-social movements of our time, excepting only one. I am not now, nor have I ever been, a liberal.”<sup>28</sup>

He saw New Deal liberalism, far from being in the adversarial relation to big business portrayed by Democratic political rhetoric, as motivated by the perceived need on the part of policy intellectuals “to save the great industrial, banking, and owning system that was threatened by the rising discontent of people generally and by,

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

<sup>28</sup> Hess, *Mostly On the Edge*, p. 35.

particularly, the very good chance that working people would organize to demand control of industry and not merely better wages.”<sup>29</sup>  
Rank-and-file middle class liberals

(in the sense of those who, like the nice ladies and proper gents of the reform movements in the big cities, wanted to do good for the common folk without letting the common folk do good for themselves) loved the idea of a government that would poke a few rich snoots and let a lot of sociologists and college professors assume titles of governmental grandeur—and spend the poor folks’ money for the poor folks’ own good.<sup>30</sup>

The central focus of the New Deal, as he summarized it, was essentially a restatement of the Corporate Liberal thesis:

to provide machinery through which government could mediate the potentially dangerous competition between industrialists and financiers which many saw as a cause, for instance, of the Great Depression. Rather than competition among the very rich, cooperation could be achieved, through various government agencies which could regulate production, oversee pricing policies, prevent unduly harsh raids of one business against another, even prevent titanic battles to form new monopolies (which might threaten the old ones!). Also, the New Deal went along with the trade union movement, but in such a way as to encourage the least dangerous part of it — the part concerned solely with wages and contracts — and discourage the most dangerous part — the part concerned with decisions, ownership, work conditions,

<sup>29</sup> Hess, *Dear America*, p. 115.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

ing developed by the Open Source Ecology/Factor e Farm project today,<sup>15</sup> have only strengthened his argument.

The great factories which seem so complicated and which, the managers say, require the special gifts of the great owners to organize, are also problems of organization and not necessities of technology. The thrust of all modern technology is toward miniaturization and cybernetic controls that make sophisticated production possible on a very small scale. Even the machinery of the steel industry is constantly reduced in scale as it increases in effectiveness. It is the demands of corporate power, and not of technology, that keep steel production as a concentrated blight in a few environments rather than letting it be more localized and lesser in environmental impact. (The most innovative plastics, as a matter of fact, are so obviously best used in small scale production settings that some giant corporations who have gone into plastics have got right out again because they simply couldn’t compete with smaller, more technically innovative and flexible plants.)<sup>16</sup>

All forms of factory production which seem to call for giant, centralized facilities, can alternatively be imagined as small, localized operations using, for instance, direct numerical control (cybernated) machinery.<sup>17</sup>

As for the raw materials required for production, it’s true as far as it goes that they “are not usually appropriate to neighborhood

<sup>15</sup> Open Source Ecology <<https://www.opensourceecology.org/>>; “Machines: Global Village Construction Set,” Open Source Ecology wiki <<https://www.opensourceecology.org/gvcs/>>. Accessed July 1, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Hess, *Dear America*, p. 230.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

waste-digestion systems, now commercially available at costs as low as a thousand dollars, will convert all human and kitchen wastes into an odorless fertilizer. Some provide modest amounts of heating gas as they do it. (The average family could do all its cooking on the gas produced by its own waste.)....

Manufacturing today is thought of as a massive large-scale system by advocates of massive large-scale ownership.

It is assumed that it is appropriate to our needs mainly because of assumptions about those needs: quickly obsolescent products, package-emphasizing products, and proliferating fad products.

In point of material fact, manufacturing has undergone the sort of technological change that has characterized all science-based activities in this century – a distinct tendency toward decentralization and small-scale units. A truly modern cybernated plant, turning out a vast array of machine parts, for instance, can be housed easily in a city neighborhood, in conventional office space. It uses computers to direct its tools, and can be handily operated by workers trained in the neighborhood....<sup>14</sup>

Hess wrote at a time when miniaturization of computerized numeric control (CNC) machine tools was just starting to make local networked production possible in places like Emilia-Romagna. Subsequent progress in cheapening and miniaturization of CNC machinery over the following decades, and the resulting growth of the micromanufacturing movement and tabletop machinery scaled to the small workshop like the Global Village Construction Set be-

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

nature of products, and the whole idea (of working for wages rather than, for instance, sharing in the entire enterprise).<sup>31</sup>

The practical effect of the liberal agenda, as opposed to the left, was — across the board — the substitution of “concentrated managerial power” for democratic control.

By applying at every accessible level of government the liberal idea of concentrated managerial power (the “good” people making decisions for the people generally), the cities have become collapsing and unmanageable jungles, neighborhoods have been abandoned and disbanded, locality has been blighted, localism has been scoffed into obsolescence....<sup>32</sup>

What attracted him to the New Left, on the other hand, was its focus on decentralism, direct democracy, and direct control by people over their own lives at the community level. The irony was that, despite so much of the New Left’s agenda mirroring the claimed principles of the right, the latter became unhinged with rage in reaction to it.

There was the old right, preaching mightily about the encroachment of the federal establishment into every area of local life. And there was SDS, in its very earliest organizing projects, working for, of all things, *neighborhood* self-reliance and independence. There were, along the way, some perceptive SDS theorists, such as Carl Oglesby (later to become a warm and admired friend) writing that there is a “moral confluence” between the old right and the new left.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118–119.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

And there were the Panthers.

The Black Panther Party for Self Defense, as it was in its beginning days in Oakland, was a nightmare to the right wing. The famed picture of armed black men standing proudly/arrogantly (take your choice according to bias) in the California State House sent shivers down our spines. But they were such wrong shivers. They were shivers of fear. They should have been shivers of pride and admiration. What right winger worthy of his extremist position and his place on the liberal blacklist had not dreamed at one time or another of that final, can't-stand-it-any-longer day when aroused Americans, like their revolutionary forefathers, would take up their muskets again and say NO to the bureaucrats?...

And, so, here were black men acting out the fantasy, actually telling a gang of bureaucrats that they would not be disarmed (a constant right-wing pride), that they would not be shoved around by the police (the right wing, of course, would never say police, because of shallow analysis, but would, instead, say politicians or bureaucrats, forgetting who backs up the politicians and the bureaucrats). In short, here were black men saying, in actual fact, that they did not consider extremism in the defense of their freedom to be a vice or moderation in the pursuit of justice to be a virtue.

Even more, the Black Panthers were neighborhood-oriented! They did not even at the outset preach a doctrine of global communism or world government or even set as a goal the assumption of national power. They wanted, instead, freedom where they lived, freedom to have communities rather than colonies.

acres of greenhouses produced two million pounds of vegetables annually at a cost of twenty cents per pound, including the amortization of the structures, the desalting of water (it's a seaside operation at Abu Dhabi on the Persian Gulf), administration, etc.... City rooftop spaces, plus vacant lots or even the centers of streets, could be used to grow ample vegetables for a local population.... This is not to say that any neighborhood would not want to supplement local vegetables with those grown by other, distant communities. They surely might. And that in turn just means that neighborhoods also have an inherent capacity to engage in "foreign trade." Herd animals such as beef cattle are clearly inappropriate to city neighborhoods. Chickens and fish are just as clearly appropriate. Aquaculture – growing fish in artificial settings – can produce high yields of high-quality protein in basement spaces....

Problems of waste disposal also have undoubtedly contributed to the assumption that there is no material possibility for local liberty. A city waste sewerage system, indeed, would seem to defy any ability of a single neighborhood. At the very least it can be assumed – and, I feel, justifiably – that a neighborhood would have to join with all contiguous neighborhoods to duplicate or even maintain the usual city sewerage system....

City waste sewerage systems are wasteful, unnecessary, often dangerous, and certainly technologically backward. Neighborhoods are hooked into them because of history, not because of any current necessity. First of all, waste is not a problem, it is a resource. City waste systems simply ignore this.... In-house



If local liberty has no material base, then it ultimately has no base at all. National political liberty – the freedom of national political leaders to act – has such a material base. For the generals it is the material base of nationally sponsored weapons production, which, in material fact, gives them the physical power to protect and extend political decisions. For the multinational corporations it involves continued access to raw materials upon which production may be based and flexibly moved hither and yon.

Unless localities could have an equivalent base in the material world, a base that can literally support the freedom of local people to make political decisions which affect their lives, then local liberty must remain a mere administrative proposal, gauged roughly by the amount of elbow room the local people are given by those who do have a base in the material world from which to exercise power.<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of Community Technology was to organize such a material base. In response to skeptics who dismissed relocalized production based on “economies of scale” and the like, Hess gave a general overview of the possibilities.

A city neighborhood, seen as a concrete-bound ghetto, scarcely seems worth considering agriculturally. True enough. Agriculture and city spaces are apparently incompatible. Gardening and city spaces are not. Can gardening produce ample food for a neighborhood?

Hydroponic gardens in small greenhouse enclosures produce vegetables at a rate many times greater than ordinary agriculture. In one notable example, ten

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

The right should have cheered. Instead, it called the cops.<sup>33</sup>

Hess’s position, in regard to conservatism, capitalism, state socialism, and managerialist liberalism alike, was that power is bad.

If every lesson I have learned in a long political life had to be distilled into a single one, it would be that when the people generally permit positions of power to exist, the people generally and in the long run suffer and become subjects. In a world of power there always are two classes: the powerful and the powerless, the owners and the dispossessed. And between these two classes there must always be a conflict of interest.... A free society is where all have power—power over and responsibility for their own lives, power and reason to respect the lives of others.<sup>34</sup>

If what he hated was managerialism and concentrated power, what he ardently desired, conversely, was for ordinary people to have full control over every aspect of their lives.

In essence, I think, the struggle will be over whether to continue to separate or to bring together the political and economic parts of our lives. The political part of our lives already has one well-defined theme: that political democracy is desirable....

There is no wider discrepancy in American life than between the familiar and accepted rhetoric of political democracy and the rejection as overly radical of the ideas of industrial democracy. Yet, I have come to feel, there can be no *actual* democracy of any sort so long

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 144–146.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72–73.

as the work people do and the lives people lead are separated by law and custom into airtight compartments.

Industrial democracy simply says that people who work should participate in the decisions of work just as they should participate in the decisions of community. It says that *doing* work entitles a person to this participation, just as *being* in a community entitles a person to participation there.<sup>35</sup>

As a result of Hess's negative experiences with AMO and Community Technology – their failure from lack of local public support – he began a gradual slide to the right. But even as late as 1979, he was still writing economic commentary that would turn a right-libertarian's hair white: "Cost is a bookkeeping matter, it is the result of social agreements and is not a part of the natural or material world. Costs are what a particular value system says they are."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 168–169.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Hess, *Community Technology* (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 8.

participated very actively. It would be a tool to serve their purposes and make possible the kinds of lives they (and not Madison Avenue fantasists) want to live. Having a role in the development, deployment, and maintenance of technology. Wouldn't people also want more of a role in politics? Wouldn't they want a politics that makes possible a democratic life rather than a politics that makes necessary a life subordinated not to politics but to *politicians*?

In politics a person is not a citizen if the person's only function is to vote. Voters choose people who, in turn, act like citizens. They argue. They establish the forms within which people live their lives. They make politics. The people who merely vote for them merely make politicians. People who argue for their positions in a town meeting are acting like citizens. People who simply drop scraps of paper in a box or pull a lever are not acting like citizens; they are acting like consumers, picking between prepackaged political items. They had nothing to do with the items. All they can do is pick what is. They cannot actively participate in making what should be.

In technology there is the same thing. To be merely a consumer of technology is always to accept and take what is and never to shape what could be.<sup>12</sup>

Besides technology narrowly defined, clearly, Hess was deeply committed to broader issues of community economic independence, self-reliance, and resilience. But for communities of people to run their own affairs, they must have a material base. A self-governing community whose material needs are controlled from outside is a contradiction in terms.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

to spend our time almost exactly as we want to. The rules and imperatives that conventional wisdom fasten on us are not binding except to the extent we let them be.

Technologies, ways of working, kinds of tools, can be developed, deployed, and maintained at the community level.

Communities, founded upon ways of life that reflect the values and aspirations of the people who compose the community, can take long steps toward exactly the degree of self-reliance that will best serve the purposes of the community. Communities can, without complex social controls, cooperate with other communities to provide things not locally available, to enlarge cultures, to do anything that will enhance the community without destroying it.

There are no shortages of anything on the face of the earth that would prevent any community from surviving healthily and happily.... This book is an argument for community participation, with all of the diversity and resultant flexibilities that that implies.<sup>11</sup>

He compared the attitudes fostered by centralized technology and production with those representative spectator “democracy” encouraged in the citizenry.

The kind of technology that is possible, and which would suit the old yearnings of the American Dream, is exactly the kind that would undermine the sort of spectator-sport politics we have come to play. It would be a technology in which ordinary people

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<sup>11</sup> Karl Hess, *Community Technology* (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 1, 4.

### III. Alternative Technology and Localism

According to Hess, it was as a result of his increasing affinity for tinkering in the immediate post-Goldwater period that he eventually “became, by default, the resident expert in appropriate, community-based technology at the Institute for Policy Studies.”<sup>1</sup>

His interest in local self-rule and community economies was also intensified by his association at IPS with Milton Kotler, the author of *Neighborhood Government*.<sup>2</sup>

His thinking at this time reflected the same broad currents of technological and industrial thinking that produced the *Whole Earth Catalog*, Colin Ward’s neighborhood workshops and reworking of Kropotkin, and the Radical Technology group; it also reflected the municipalism of Murray Bookchin and others.

I recall standing in front of a church in Washington and hearing a Panther speak of why he did not want the Panthers to be involved in an “international movement.” International, he said, meant something between nations. He was not interested in nations, he said. He wanted a world where relations were between communities. Intercommunalism was the phrase he used.

It was a haunting echo. Gandhi had spoken of a world of villages, relating one to another without the

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<sup>1</sup> Hess, *Mostly On the Edge*, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> Hess, *Dear America*, pp. 81–82.

artificial restrictions of political systems and borders. Goldwater, even though an ardent nationalist, had made speech after speech suggesting the dream of people living in communities of self-reliance and self-responsibility. The antifederalists of the American Revolution, preferring the Articles of Confederation to the nation-binding Constitution, also had obviously dreamed of a land which might never be a great and powerful *nation* but which could be a sweet and free *country* of towns and villages and farms.<sup>3</sup>

And it reflected as well the general currents of populism, decentralism, and direct democracy embodied in such cultural artifacts as The People's Bicentennial Commission manifesto *Common Sense II* and Harry Boyte's *The Backyard Revolution*, during the fluid period of experimentation in the mid- to late 1970s, when such ideas seemed to offer a viable alternative to the collapsing New Deal Consensus, and before the New Right achieved hegemony.

As he became increasingly disillusioned with New Left organizational politics and the authoritarian hijacking of its institutions — albeit not with leftist analysis — Hess intensified his focus on alternative technology as a way of substituting direct action for politics. Despite his alienation from the institutional politics of the New Left, he celebrated the continuation of its principles in the communitarian and decentralized technology movements.

New Left firebrands who once thought they could organize people just on the basis of a bullhorn and book-learned slogans have reemerged as artisans and craftspeople, doctors, lawyers, nurses, biologists, physicists, you name it—still working in local political settings but now more a part of the general working population, possessing new hard skills to go along

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

Washington, D.C., and, at the time, had a population that was 58 percent black, 22 percent Latin American, 18 percent white, and the remainder mostly Middle Eastern. It was a neighborhood in transition, economically quite poor but culturally diverse and exciting. It was, we believed, the perfect place to try an experiment in participatory community that would make technology accessible and understandable to those who choose to use it. There was, we believed, a need for Community Technology. While neighbors, citizens, and community leaders worried about every other aspect of the neighborhood, there seemed to be no one very concerned about its material base — how it could produce things.

Our answer was inexpensive, available, and decentralized technology — giving local residents the tools, and the scientific understanding, to produce what they needed and where they needed it most: at home and in community.<sup>10</sup>

Hess began the book *Community Technology* by contrasting the giant, centralized institutions that were failing to adequately perform their functions, that were “creaking, crackling, and even crashing under their own weight” to an alternative way of doing things:

I am convinced now that there are other possibilities. I have worked enough at the practical development and deployment of them to see them as wholly available as alternatives here and now.

It is possible for us — working together in social situations of various sizes according to our preferences —

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<sup>10</sup> Hess, *Mostly On the Edge*, p. 236.

they were prudently needed. It would be a world of diversity, not frantic conformity. Physicists undoubtedly would pursue the deeper meanings of material particles, but perhaps with accelerators made by themselves, rather than in remote factories by government grant. Medical researchers undoubtedly would chase the virus into its molecular lair, but health care might be more a matter of everyday community activity than an exotic performance in a marble hall. Gravity might be conquered for some purposes, and yet the horse might serve perfectly well to carry a person for other purposes.<sup>8</sup>

With his wife Therese, and in collaboration with *Communitas* College and the IPS, he formed the Community Technology non-profit in 1973, based in the Adams-Morgan neighborhood of Washington, D.C., under the umbrella of the Adams-Morgan Organization.<sup>9</sup> His thinking on alternative technology and community economics in this period is reflected in *Dear America* (written in 1975, when he was still actively involved in the Community Technology project), his book *Neighborhood Power*, coauthored with David Morris in the same year, and his retrospective account *Community Technology*, written in 1979.

Its purpose was simply to demystify technology so that instead of seeming a mysterious force it could become a part of everyday life, a catalyst to community self-reliance, a way to give people greater control over their individual destinies, and a servant in direct service to human needs in a local setting.

That local setting was the Adams-Morgan neighborhood. It spanned some seventy blocks in the center of

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 249–250.

<sup>9</sup> Hess, *Mostly On the Edge*, pp. 235–236; *Dear America*, p. 239.

with their rhetoric, and infinitely more respected as a result. Counter-culture survivors have undergone a similar growth. Food faddism, for some, has been modified into skillful farming. Hallucinations have dimmed and arts have grown. Crafts abound, and not just artsy-craftsy ones but earthier skills such as plumbing, carpentry and masonry. Graduates of the counter culture now operate thriving repair shops, garages, stores, and even community financial development funds, all sustained by the work of participants who enjoy full equality of voice and responsibility.<sup>4</sup>

In describing the liberatory potential of new, decentralized technology, Hess stressed the contrast between the “new knowledge” and the old institutions.

The new knowledge, produced by millions of hard-working people, tells us that healthful food can be grown in small scale operations in and near cities, avoiding transportation and packaging costs. The old institutions tell us that farming is a corporate prerogative and that the goal of farming is not nutrition at all, but is first and foremost profits. The new knowledge tells us that disposable containers and tacky goods are technologically absurd and that more permanent, not wasteful things could be built and could even be built in organizations of rather small scale.<sup>5</sup>

...We are involved in what John Blair has called “The New Industrial Revolution,” the revolution of new techniques, new tools, and new materials which allow for decentralized technology that is relatively simple

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 205–206.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

to use and inexpensive to operate. As Dr. Blair states: “These new materials are neither labor intensive, nor capital intensive. They are knowledge intensive.”<sup>6</sup>

The general principles of a decentralized and human alternative technology, he stated as:

- (1) It would not increase the incidence of death, disease, or nervousness.
- (2) It would conform to, rather than attempt to defy, the widest possible array of physical principles, and would not be evaluated just in terms of its own operation. It would, in other words, exist in nature and not in isolation from it.
- (3) Its application would be organized by those who would operate the tool or process in consultative conjunction with anyone affected by the tool or process. They would be accountable for their work because they could be absolutely identified with it. There would be no right of ownership which would prevent the use of the tool or process by anyone else capable of operating it and willing to be accountable for it.
- (4) It would mainly use resources that could be renewed, replaced, or recycled. If such virtually irreplaceable resources as fossil hydrocarbons (petroleum, coal) were used, they should be used in ways with the least possible impact on the environment.
- (5) It would be appropriate for widespread community participation and understanding. It could be operated nonhierarchically, would encourage productive

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

involvement and discourage consideration of itself solely in terms of consumption.

(6) Its availability to small human communities would be an important measure of its effectiveness. This contrasts with the current technological standard of effective support of large institutions.

(7) It would foster a culture in which the applications of scientific principles would always be guided by such tests as these:

Is the application such that if everyone in the world were individually availed of its use, or involved in its operation, no human life would be threatened by it, no community destroyed by it, no future threatened by it?

Or,

The application of any scientific principle should do unto others as we would wish to have done to ourselves by others applying the same principle.

A strong reinforcement of an alternative technology’s limiting principle would be the absence of restrictions on information regarding any scientific principle and the rejection of any restrictive rights of ownership in regard to the application of any scientific principle.<sup>7</sup>

He also speculated that the human-scale technological ecosystem of the future would embody a principle essentially the same as what Lewis Mumford called “polytechnic,” or the coexistence of what are conventionally labeled “high-technology” and “low-technology,” adapted respectively to their most appropriate uses.

In such a life-style, technologies would be applied not simply because they were known but only because

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 243–244.