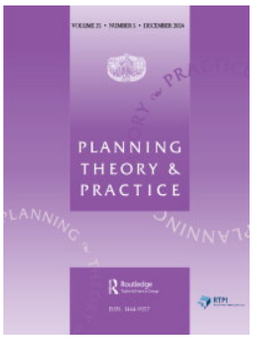

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The Essential Tension: Patsy Healey's Conception of Democracy in Planning and Public Policy

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ABSTRACT

Patsy Healey was a major democratic theorist. Although often implicit, it is easy to discern in her work a normative-empirical theory of democracy that is characterized by a focus on improving state institutions and leveraging the experiential knowledge of affected citizens with the issue at hand. Two features distinguish Patsy's approach to democratic governance. Her refusal to vacate the essential tension between an institutional and a participatory, practice-oriented approach to democracy. And a steadfast pragmatist approach to collective problem solving that valorizes the effectiveness of experiential knowledge. This orientation impelled her to grasp democracy governance through the micro-politics of planning and public policy and suffuse her work with a spirit of hope.

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Democracy as Lived Experience

In 2015 Patsy and I published an Interface on civic enterprises for *Planning Theory and Practice*. Civic enterprises – today we would call them commons – are bottom-up initiatives in which citizens produce public goods and services (Wagenaar, 2019; Wagenaar & Prainsack, 2021). We brought together cases of commons from Italy, Germany, Spain, the UK, and the Netherlands. In addition to describing their functioning and organization, we explored what they could mean for the quality of democracy. In rereading our Introduction to the Interface I was struck by the following sentence: "Citizens and residents find themselves drawn into policymaking as well as practical delivery, linking policy and action in a much more *intimate* way than is common in standard models of 'public participation' in formal planning processes" (Wagenaar et al., 2015, p. 557, italics added). I emphasized the word 'intimate' because it captures two important themes in Patsy's work, themes that were – and have since become even more – central in my own work. These are democracy and epistemology, or, more precisely, living democracy and a pragmatist conception of knowledge that that emerges out of action.

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The title is of course from Thomas Kuhn's book (1979). In Kuhn's case the tension is between tradition and innovation, or more specifically, between established scientific paradigms and the anomalies that challenge them. As we will see, this is not so different from the essential tension in Patsy Healey's work.

Let's begin with democracy. Planners can be forgiven that they haven't always grasped the radical import of Patsy's conception of democracy. Indeed, they might have missed altogether that Patsy was in many ways an important democratic theorist. It takes no effort to read the Preface to her book *Making Better Places* (Healey, 2010) as a succinct statement of a developmental, realist, participatory form of democracy, yet she rarely discusses the nature of democracy as a standalone institution. Patsy situates her ideas about democracy solidly within the field of planning. She argues for a recalibration of the planning process in "three broad areas of practice": the management of neighborhood change, the promotion of major development practices, and spatial strategy making (Healey, 2010, p. x).

In the remainder of the book Patsy elaborates her democratic stance. She criticizes how the institutions of place management and development were "subverted by powerful groups" and wonders how we can bring "people's varied experiences and aspirations about living in urban areas" back into the governance of places (Healey, 2010, p. 15). "It is here," she says, "that the planning project during the later part of the of the twentieth century came to draw on wider debates about the nature of political community and democratic life" (2010, p. 15). Notice her use of the phrase 'democratic *life*': democracy as lived experience, not as disembodied, abstract theory. Patsy's understanding of democracy was always poised between equally important poles: on the one hand, the demands of organizing and governing a beneficial state that seeks to improve public institutions and infrastructure to enhance societal flourishing, and on the other the concrete, everyday experiences and struggles, and the practical knowledge that comes with it, of people living in communities. This dual focus is beautifully expressed in the following statement: "The challenge by the end of the twentieth century was to find ways of giving more attention to citizen voice and initiative, while retaining the capacity to initiate and manage complex development programmes justified by a generalized collective purpose" (2010, p. 53).

Patsy rarely wrote about democracy directly, in the manner of a traditional democratic theorist. Her conception of democracy was implicit in her writings about planning and place making. There is one exception, however: a paper called 'Re-Enchanting Democracy as a Way of Life' (Healey, 2016). Here she develops a normative-empirical theory of democracy as the challenge to forge a working relationship between the formal institutions of the state and the lived experience of citizens in communities. Patsy never lost sight of this duality. We look in vain in her work for grand theoretical statements about Democracy. Hers is an extended attempt to square the circle of how to combine active citizen participation with state-driven processes of governance. She situates herself inside the essential tension between these spheres.

Before I present insights from Patsy's 'Re-Enchanting' paper, I step back for a moment to get some perspective on the unique accomplishments of her theory of democracy, and why it presents both a highly pertinent (given the permanent state of polycrisis in which we find ourselves) and an intellectually fertile program.

I can offer a generic outline of Patsy's conception of democracy. She is aware that the usual solutions to the crisis of liberal electoral democracy (deliberative democracy, local democracy, interactive governance, commons) are at best supplements to representative democracy (see also, Bader & Maussen, 2024, p. 67). She describes conflicting trends that make democratic governance more difficult: on the one hand, the pluralization of values and cultures in civil society and citizens' lack of trust in authorities; on the other, ideologically informed neoliberal reforms that robbed governments of their usual tools. Government became increasingly fragmented through multilevel policies and governance arrangements: transferring sovereignty up

to transnational bodies and arrangements, down to regional and local entities, as well as sideways to non-elected bodies such as central banks. The growing complexity of modern democratic societies obviously makes effective and authoritative government more difficult, but also offers opportunities for beneficial change. Whatever democratic reforms scholars of planning and public policy suggest must take these complexities into account (Bader & Maussen, 2024, p. 19). Patsy's work on democratic governance in planning and policy does that, not in the usual way by sketching complex, interlocking institutional arrangements, but by embracing a kind of pragmatist experimentalism.

Anyone with even a fleeting acquaintance with her work knows such an abstract account does not do justice to Patsy's contributions to planning theory. What characterizes her writing is that she approaches trends experientially, by describing the lived experience of the people – administrators, planning officers, local politicians, citizens –tasked with finding solutions to vexing problems within a complex force field of overlapping constraints (budgetary limits, rule of law, power configurations, discursive biases, corporate and financial rule). She wants the reader to understand the complexities of modern governance by describing and understanding – from within as it were – the dilemmas, conflicts, setbacks, and victories ordinary people experience. She is averse to merely criticizing but insists on finding opportunities for change:

> …(C)ritique that demolishes without having an agenda for change, and those who criticise without grasping just how challenging it is to do the fine-grain balancing and synthesising inherent in planning work, … may offer few resources to those seeking to move through the cracks and advance new agendas and practices. (Healey, 2010, p. 238)

Her style of writing, of perhaps more precisely inquiry, reflects Patsy's deep-seated pragmatism and conviction that one may belabor the formal features of planning and government – laws, regulation, institutions, constitutions, organizational structures, and so on – but at the end of the day local politicians, administrators, planning officers, and citizens breathe life into them and make them work. Moreover, it is from the practical solutions to the challenges people face that we can draw wider lessons for improving and reforming the institutions of planning and government.

The Essential Tension in Understanding Democracy

Patsy consistently balances opposing tendencies – call them dichotomies – that shape respectively the practice of and literature on democratic governance. Since nineteenth-century Hegelian articulations of the state as a carrier of progress, security, and stability, the state has been endowed by its (conservative) adherents and (Marxist) critics alike with autonomous, almost transcendental, qualities (Dewey, 1954 [1927], p. 20). Even neoliberals hostile to the state insist on a minimalist but 'strong state' to protect markets and discipline the working population (Gamble, 1994). By way of contrast, we can dip almost at random in Patsy's writings and come up with a statement that highlights the benign and necessary role of the state, such as this passage:

> It is not helpful to see these strands (state and civil society) as conflicting approaches between which a choice must be made. Instead, they each highlight a possible way forward in the effort to pull our polities back to a more engaged and interrelated relation between the spheres of state and civil society. (Healey, 2010, p. 14)

Contrary to the sanguine visions of the Hegelians, she is acutely aware that in everyday practice the state often is inward looking, and just as often negligent or overbearing. Patsy is therefore a strong proponent of involving citizens and communities in formulating and implementing planning and policy decisions. She is not a communitarian romantic, but always seeks a viable working relationship between state and civil society. She speaks of a "new governance landscape" and a new "political culture"

> in which the formal institutions of representative democracy are but one dimension, not the dominant one, of a polity described in terms of the various networks which connect arenas and stakeholders in all kinds of combinations, in dispersed governance forms, rather than in the form of organizational hierarchies and voting procedures. (Healey, 2010, p. 14)

If Patsy's work merely gravitated around the opposition between state and civil society it would not continue to inspire the scholarly community in planning and public policy. It would have been considered an offshoot of participative democracy. However, throughout her writings she overcomes a second opposition in her analysis of state and civil society: that between abstract theory and concrete experience. In addition to the practical challenges of organizing good democratic governance in a complex society, she attends to the epistemological dimension. Micro-politics or micro-dynamics are common terms in Patsy's writings. She means two things by them. First, that ordinary people, those who live and work in everyday situations, at the 'coal face,' have important experiential knowledge to contribute to issues of placemaking and public policy. Second, that the importance of local knowledge implies that there are no blueprints, no general formulas for forging a productive working relationship between state and society:

> [T]here is no universal formula for determining what transformative strategy to embark on and which steps to take first. There are only general orientations, and then a specific grasp of the institutional organisation and dynamics of governance activity in particular places in specific contexts. (Healey, 2010, p. 14)

Again and again, Patsy stresses the need to ensure that the voice of the people informs the business of governing. This is as much a normative as a functional position. Normatively, she argues that fairness, justice, and decency are key principles of any self-respecting democracy. Functionally, democratic governance is better when informed by the experiential knowledge of the people who are at the receiving end of officials' activities. I hesitate to use the word 'functionally' here for fear of sounding reductionist. Patsy's is a comprehensive, integrated approach to the significance of experience in governance. Experience does not only have instrumental value but also shapes how we see ourselves and government institutions, what we consider valid aspirations for our children and our community, what we consider threats to our wellbeing.

> The orientations matter. They affect how we understand the world and our place in it. They shape what we take to be 'institutions' and how we see ourselves and our relations with others. They focus our moral commitments and the ethics of how we feel we should behave, especially 'in public.' Struggles over such orientations are not just the focus of much debate among academics and political activists. They underlie and often surface in many local debates and struggles about area development initiatives. (Healey, 2010, p. 14)

What makes Patsy's work unique is her refusal to vacate the tension between prevailing intellectual oppositions. Her position recognises that the tension is indeed 'essential,' the

necessary condition to make the fraught relationship between state institutions and civil communities work. The tension is generative. This allegiance to a form of planning and policymaking that does justice to the needs, fears, and aspirations of citizens and communities she calls "people-centred governance" (Healey, 2016, p. 25). To grasp how unique her position is, think of the usual way that scholars debating such issues resolve the oppositions: resolutions that emerge from avoiding the discomfort and uneasiness that the tension between the democratic and epistemic positions generate. The state-civil society distinction usually bifurcates in either a plea for functional or strong institutions as a condition for good governance, or a valorisation of the benefits of community-driven initiatives. Similarly, the second opposition usually results in highly abstract conceptualizations of democratic models or highly detailed, empirical descriptions of community initiatives. Models of the State and abstract theory are attractive because they carry self-evident epistemic authority. They suggest real, universal, expert knowledge. Civil society and citizen experience, on the other hand, suggest moral virtue, the affirmation of justice and equality in the face of oppression and inequality. Each of us who frequents political science or planning conferences knows what I'm talking about. To choose to dwell in the essential tension between these opposites means to evoke both misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Patsy's plea for collaborative governance has been crudely criticized for not being sufficiently attentive to the forces of power (Huxley, 2000), but those who read her work carefully see that she can be scathing about the inward-looking, oppressive behaviour of state officials (Healey, 2010, pp. 10–11).

Hope and Pragmatism

The key to understanding Patsy's 'people-centred governance' is pragmatism. She doesn't wear it on her sleeve, but her work on place making and governance can be read as a careful, detailed development of Dewey's social and philosophical theory. Dewey famously argued against the reification of the state as a metaphysical entity. The state is us, he said, and needs to be made and remade continuously: "Thus the problem of discovering the state is not a problem for theoretical inquirers surveying solely institutions that already exist. It is a practical problem of human beings living in association with one another, of mankind generally" (Dewey, 1954 [1927], p. 32). Patsy sides with Dewey in criticizing authorities' intrinsic distrust of citizens that lies at the heart of electoral liberal democracy. Because the people lack the ability to make reasoned judgments on complex issues, so the argument goes, we need elite experts to guide society towards economic growth and internal stability (Healey, 2010, p. 10). Like Dewey, Patsy finds such an attitude insulting to the capacity for discernment and moral judgment of ordinary people. Instead, she says:

> [Dewey] thought of the culture of a polity as a complex, evolving phenomenon, shaped by the issues people got engaged in and the ways in which such engagement developed. He believed that governments should foster practices in which people learned how to understand the multi-sided character of many issues of public concern, while those involved in governance work learned how to promote such learning and to respond to the resultant shape and focus of issue agendas. In this way, 'publics' and political cultures are in continual formation, not pre-given. (Healey, 2010, p. 11)

Dewey's writings are simultaneously crystal clear and maddeningly vague. They can probably best be read as a road map, indicating a direction of acting and thinking. I read Patsy's work as the development, the concretisation, of Dewey's abstract ideas. Her method, as she explains,

is to highlight the "micro-dynamic of practices." She does this by employing a case-based approach, but always careful to link the micro-practices of the case to the "wider and long-term evolution of cultures" (Healey, 2010, p. 17). In the detailed discussion of the (historical development of the) case, readers may lose sight of the larger principles of a pragmatist theory of state, governance and democracy. But to realize Dewey's democratic vision we dig deep into the particulars of "living in association with one another," of 'discovering' and 're-making' the state, of the creation of adequately flexible and responsive political and legal machinery" (Dewey, 1954 [1927], pp. 31–32). Patsy never shrank from this challenge, always dwelling inside the essential tension of democratic governance.

Although pragmatist thinking suffused her work, after her retirement Patsy wrote one article in which she explicitly articulated her understanding of the pragmatist tradition in philosophy, planning and public policy (Healey, 2009). "The pragmatic tradition in planning thought" contains all the themes familiar from her other writings: the anti-dualism (2009, p. 279), the flow of life (2009, p. 280), the social embeddedness of scientific and practical judgement (2009, p. 279), thinking as self-corrective experimentation (2009, p. 280), and the continuity of planning, policy making and democracy (2009, p. 280). The article is a tour de force of succinct exposition. In the relatively limited space of a journal article, she summarizes the main precepts of the originators of pragmatism (Peirce, James, Dewey), their uptake by more contemporary philosophers (Rorty), scholars of policy (Lindblom, Schön) and planning (Hoch, Friedmann, Forester), culminating in a virtuoso summary that can easily be read as a credo. I'd like to end my personal overview of Patsy's work with this pragmatist credo.

In the final section of her article, which, with characteristic modesty she calls "a preliminary assessment" (2009, p. 287), she begins by recognizing the complexity of the world that planners and policymakers face. While complexity theory has generated considerable scholarly work, much of it is analytical and critical, lacking suggestions for how to act. In contrast, "the major contribution of the pragmatic tradition has been to focus on the challenge of 'acting in the world,' the challenges of forming conceptions and making judgments in the social worlds of governance practices" (2009, p. 287). She then boils this orientation down to three "recognitions."

> The first is the importance of grounding criteria for practical judgment in the human capacity for social learning and for discovery through experience in the flow of life lived in association with others … The second is that the full range of human capacities, material, moral, and aesthetic, has the potential to enter into public policy practices … Third, pragmatists emphasize the importance of systemic methods rather than reliance only on analytical methods to arrive at problem solutions. (2009, p. 287)

Taken together, Patsy sees these principles or orientations as embodying hope, and a belief in a better future: not as a utopian fantasy but as a disposition that can be willed into being (2009, p. 287).

Some may dismiss Patsy's vision of a people-centred governance in planning and public policy as utopian or naïve. The contemporary accelerating surge towards autocracy and the erosion of principles of reason and decency in public debate seem to threaten her work with obsolescence. But the theory and practice of planning and public policy need her ideas now more than ever. The central theme that suffuses her work is hope – if necessary, against the odds. Particularly in situations of oppression, hope resides in the interstices of state and society, in the free spaces that citizens carve out for themselves within their communities, in which they find new identities and self-respect, new values of civic virtue, new solutions to collective

problems (Evans & Boyte, 1986, p. 17). Evans and Boyte (1986, p. 17), in language that echoes Patsy's, call these free spaces "the inner life of democratic movements" that require us to rethink traditional categories of politics, civil society and democracy. To give in to fashionable despair or dismissal in the face of obvious oppression amounts to complacency or intellectual apathy. In Patsy's own words, more prescient than ever:

> In conclusion, the pragmatist tradition, with its ever hopeful view of human potentiality in social contexts, provides a valuable antidote both to a paralytic focus on the "darkness" into which many Western dreams seem to have sunk and to the disabling cynicism to which much critical social science can lead. (Healey, 2009, p. 288)

Coda

After publishing our *Interface* on civic enterprises, Patsy and I became good friends. We regularly met to catch up, had a lively email exchange, read and commented on each other's manuscripts. I eagerly looked forward to her end-of-year letters which contained an annotated list of the books she had read that year. Since our *Interface*, my own work focused on the commons, democracy (more conventional than Patsy's take on it), practice theory, teaching interpretive methods, and deliberative policy analysis. Writing this tribute to Patsy's thinking made me aware once more of the huge debt I owe her work. This is perhaps a somewhat puzzling statement. Normally we are aware of the extent of our intellectual debts. It testifies to Patsy's tenacious conviction that dwelling within the essential tension between state institutions and civic life, abstract conceptualizing and experiential knowledge, critical analysis and the belief in the capacity for human betterment, that I had to be 'reminded' of the inspirational hold her work has had on me. Hers is not, and will never be, a fashionable intellectual stance. But she sees something that many scholars fail to see – namely that the essential tension is a generative, creative force. It is a continuing source of new ideas and insights on democracy, governance, place-making and public policy in changing, and often trying times. I will miss my email correspondence and the occasional lunch with Patsy, but I know that that her unique approach to inquiry and action has and will inspire and guide me in my professional work.

The occasion of this article is a sad one, but I have experienced writing it as a gift. By immersing myself again in Patsy's work, I discovered insights that through the passing of time had faded in my memory, or the value of which, through my continuing development as a scholar, I feel I can only now assess more adequately. Since my days as a graduate student, I have been committed to a pragmatist approach to policy, democracy and learning. Patsy and I used to talk about this a lot. I often referred to her article on the pragmatist tradition in planning and policy in my writing. But that is not a guarantee that I understood, in a rounded way, the depth and originality of Patsy's use of pragmatist thinking in her exploration of democratic governance. We discover new aspects in rereading the work of important writers. I needed the writing of this article to see how intrinsic epistemic and ethical insights of pragmatism are to Patsy's approach to planning and policy in complex democratic societies. I had failed to grasp previously the value of dwelling in the essential tension between abstract theory and lived experience in advancing democratic scholarship. My own work on the commons and democratic theory does it, sort of, but nowhere with the consistency and resolution that I discern in Patsy's work. I miss Patsy as a friend, but I console myself with the knowledge that her work remains an enduring source of insight and inspiration.

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