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Citation for final published version:

Turnbull, Neil 2024. Caring for place: Community development in rural England [Book Review]. Community Development Journal 59 (2) , pp. 369-371. 10.1093/cdj/bsad029

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsad029>

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Caring for Place. Community Development in Rural England

Patsy Healey (2023) Routledge in conjunction with the Royal Town Planning Institute, New York and Abingdon, 2023, ISBN: 978-0-367-63201-4, 224 pages.

‘My sense is that such a commitment [to community development] is needed more than ever as people in so many parts of the world struggle to find a way forward’ (p. xiii)

These are uncertain times as multiple crises elicit action at the same time as state accountability and responsibility are on the wane increasingly leaving society to look after itself. The intersections of such shifts and demands have the potential to overwhelm community development practice *and* scholarship raising important questions over how to approach such work.

In this context, Patsy Healey offers ‘Caring for place’ a timely exploration of the power of grassroots civil society activism. Exquisitely written, this book draws on Healey’s personal involvement in community development in a corner of northeast England and its wider implications. A rigorous and challenging account of contemporary local development, it will be of great interest to individuals interested in community development, community groups, practitioners, street-level officials, councillors, policy makers, government, academics, and the academy, in the UK and beyond.

Healey’s approach is nuanced and inspiring. Healey is clear about her insider/outsider positionality as someone living in the community that she is motivated to help, while also bringing ‘outside’ knowledge, skills, and time – (time which, it is acknowledged, is partly due to the author’s retirement. This is an honest account that negates the romanticism of community, documenting the frustrations and huge effort involved. This is underpinned by a strong ethical approach shaped by a ‘personal commitment to a progressive outlook, understood as promoting a more open-minded, tolerant, inclusive and outward-looking culture of local action’ (P. xii-xiii). This phrase, repeated throughout the book, goes beyond the personal and reads as a guiding principle for action. It offers a template for the values and norms that could guide community ‘doing’ development.

‘Caring for Place’ is arranged over ten chapters making full use of the book format to explore a wide range of connected issues. It offers an, at least, five-fold contribution to understandings of the potential of contemporary community development. First, the book makes a significant empirical contribution to knowledge by closely scrutinising practice and learning from what has happened. Healey’s epistemological position foregrounds empirical data thus valuing lived experiences and understandings as they ‘unfold in their multiple dimensions’ (P. 12). This making sense of community in action is a great strength of the book: it avoids the narrow application of *a priori* theoretical frameworks that can overshadow local understandings, mirroring recent calls from within academia to refrain from clinging to metaphorical ‘lifeboat(s) of apparent foundations’ (Wills & Lake, 2020).

Instead, Healey's account engages in how locally identified problems have been solved locally. Yet, fidelity to local understandings should not be misunderstood as naive or apolitical. Healey's approach is tethered to an awareness of inequalities, is motivated 'to move towards a world where everyone has a chance to flourish' (P. 7).

Healey offers three case studies (a local development trust, a support network for older people, and a Neighbourhood Plan initiative). Focusing on what has happened means that there are omissions. For example, Healey laments the absence of projects that address the environment. Austerity - shot through all these experiences - is only briefly mentioned in name, albeit with Healey positioning the motivations for community action more broadly as partly adaptation to uncertainties, a defensive action and/or innovative experiment (see Chapter 9).

The book's second contribution is that, significantly, 'Caring for Place' spans a twenty-five-year period. This temporality is an important, albeit implicit, warning against fleeting glimpses of quick disembodied research, and shares parallels with recent feminist ethics of care that underline the value of slow scholarship (see Mountz et al., 2015). By taking her time, Healey offers a long view that encompasses a range of societal, economic, and political turns over a quarter century setting community action within in a broader context.

Third, based on this empirical data, Healey brings new conceptual understandings to community-led development. This includes coining the notion of 'place-community' which both acknowledges the ambivalence of longstanding tropes of 'place' and 'community' (see Taylor 2011) whilst productively combines them as a focus for collective action (chapters 3 & 4). The notion of 'governance ecosystem' which 'refer(s) to the set of interacting agencies, with networks and nodes, which "govern" the affairs of social formation' (P. 13) (chapter 5) provides a way to consider relationality. These are new tools that help to think about community development today.

Fourth, Healey furthers theoretical understandings of grassroots development as a productive and progressive space. This is explored through several interconnected issues, including i) recognising how power is navigated to address local need and politics (chapter 6), ii) highlighting how local narratives around the future benefit from being, but are not always, progressive (chapter 7), and iii) detailing the nature and significance of the public value created (chapter 8). In doing so, Healey champions the potential for experimentation in micro-collective activism as an explicit search for different ways of organising society - including, fairer ways of distributing resources in contrast to capitalism, to finding local ways of management rather than hierarchical diktat and living within ecological and planetary limits rather than reliance on exploitation and extraction (see chapter 9). For Healey, this is more than austerity induced 'gap-filling' but offers a different way for state and civil society to work together whilst signposting the pitfalls that such work entails.

Finally, the great contribution of Healey's book is in challenging us to reconsider what we think we know about community development, what we think it can achieve, and what its limits are. This is a difficult task as we must navigate through threats of coercion to reach the progressive. Yet, in asking us to cast aside binary notions and embrace the messiness of

practice, 'Caring for Place' offers a hopeful – yet not uncritical – account of the potential of grassroots civil society activism. Healey's well-crafted arguments offer glimpses of community activism 'not trapped in local traditions of the past – but struggling in a variety of ways to move forward into the unknown' (P. 184). This is a cautious and important message of hope in these inauspicious times.

References

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsad029>