

KETTERING REVIEW



A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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The Continuously Planning City

by Judith Green

Our heritage as an American people is at odds with many of our contemporary cultural habits, aided and abetted by influential ideological claims, uninviting institutional forms, and a major shift in the balance of practical powers.

Alexis de Tocqueville noted with amazement in reflecting on his travels in America during the early 1830s that the new culture then emerging here from the transplanted root stocks of diverse older cultures took opportunities for active, ongoing, democratic citizen participation very seriously. A passion for democracy was reflected not only in widespread, persisting interest in national and state affairs but also in active, ongoing participation in social and political institutions and issues at local and regional levels. Through formal (elected or appointed) roles on city councils and school boards, and also through informal (volunteer) roles in meeting community needs in various reliable ways, these ancestor Americans, throughout all of our new nation's regions, expected to participate continuously and effectively in shaping a shared future, and actually did so with enthusiasm.

This is our heritage as an American people—a distinctive heritage we can draw upon today that is very different from those of many peoples in other parts of the world, but also a heritage at odds with many of our contemporary cultural habits, especially as these are aided and abetted by influential ideological claims, uninviting institutional forms, and a major shift in the balance of practical powers that has emerged in the years after Tocqueville's visit. Since the early 1960s, Americans' shared heritage of direct democracy often has been an influential rhetorical resource for justifying the creation of a wide range of formal and informal opportunities for citizen participation in government and in other future-shaping processes and insti-

tutions. During the same period, however, dangerous habits of daily living have become increasingly widespread—constant busy-ness, fashionable cynicism, reliance on experts, willful ignorance of our nation’s history and of current events, materialism, personal greed,

Daunting concentrations of economic, legal, communicative, and political power discourage many people from democratic citizen participation.

and, especially since September 11, feelings of “ontological insecurity,” generalized anxiety, and personal impotence. These shared bad habits have interacted in a caustic combination with the antiparticipatory rhetoric of “democratic realists,” the seeming inaccessibility of bureaucratic governmental and cultural structures, and the 21st-century daunting concentrations of economic, legal, communicative, and political power to discourage many people from using both traditional and recently created opportunities for democratic citizen participation in America—if they even know these exist.

Thus, our challenge in the 21st century is to renew and expand America’s cultural habits of democratic participation at all levels—national, state, regional, and local—in ways that realistically take in account these various obstacles and work effectively to overcome them. We must guide these efforts with a two-sided goal: (1) to correct and balance otherwise unreliable aspects of representative

democracy and (2) to provide existentially vital opportunities for individual growth, valuable experience of community membership, and a shared, well-founded sense of collective efficacy. Our recent history shows that the process of deepening and expanding America’s cultures of democratic participation works not by once-or-always legal fiat or by unidirectional influence (whether top down or grassroots up), but through ongoing mutually influential transactions among all our levels of government and community living. Sometimes these work in close coordination with one another, and sometimes their proponents face off in pitted struggle; but both our complex democratic form of government and our complex democratic culture evolve through creative tensions among diverse opponents and diverse proponents of citizen participation, activated by equally imperative but differing visions.

Moreover, our recent history also shows that effective citizen participation of the kinds that have deep and lasting effects on our wider regional and national cultures does not occur because of individual choices and actions alone, though it does require competent, energetic, democracy-minded individuals who expect



to exercise influence. It also requires valued communities of struggle that can stimulate and support such individual citizen-activists, working through established participatory organizations with their own shared visions and operative structures, and formal or informal institutional ties with government, or at least with other democratic participation-minded organizations working within reliable, well-coordinated coalitions that allow such organizations together to exert effective influence, whether of an occasional or of an ongoing nature. The process seems to work as follows: valued communities of competent, energetic, participation-minded individuals



Voluntary organizations have, since the days of Tocqueville's visit, influenced the future of American society.

find or revitalize democratic-change organizations and coalitions, and similar individuals who hold representative roles within democratic government and other cultural institutions reach out to or at least respond to them in order to form a network of cooperative ties. The participatory democratic organizations and coalitions that these collaborating individuals create or revitalize reciprocally influence their own further individuation and growth in leadership capacities, while functioning as “schools of democracy” for the education of new citizen-activists and also as stabilizers of patterns of cooperative ties and coordinated influences that allow these coalitions to last long enough to have real and enduring effects within the wider culture.

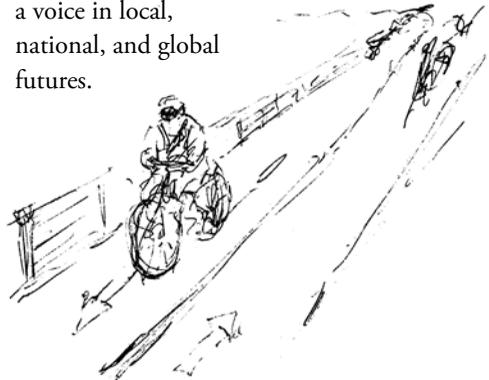
Through the efforts of such visionary citizen-activists, democracy-minded organizations, issue-oriented coalitions, and reliable collaborations with elected and appointed representatives, many formal and informal opportunities for direct citizen participation in American government at all levels have come into existence since the late 1960s. America's great mass movements of that era—the Civil Rights Movement, the antiwar movement, the women's movement, and the environmental movement—energized and educated an enormous cadre of experienced citizen-activists who learned the hard way that the occasional, informal influence of unaffiliated citizen-activists tends to lack staying power in government and other future-shaping institutions, even though it profoundly affects the activists' individual lives and has some effect on their larger culture. Many of those who have sustained their activist commitments over time have learned to value the influence-stabilizing, hope-sustaining function of continuing nongovernmental organizations and their movement-shaping coalitions, and also of formal, elected or appointed, insider roles in influencing government policies.

Over the past 30 years, state and federal mandates for real citizen participation have effectively stimulated the growth of expectations and capacities among a core group of citizen participants to whom these opportunities seemed important and attractive, helping to foster the emergence of participatory cultures in some American states and urban regions that contrast markedly with the political cultures of other states and regions, in which more limited citizen roles or even “pseudoparticipation” remains the norm.

More often than not, citizen participation has earned little more than empty rhetoric.

There are now many formal, periodic opportunities for real citizen participation in comprehensive planning processes within American cities and their surrounding metropolitan regions through which citizens can make an important difference in shaping their local and regional futures, especially when the state and local cultural preconditions are supportive. There are also many permanent participatory roles for citizens within local governments on planning and zoning boards that approve more limited development plans and variances, and on civic boards concerned with the arts, historical preservation, parks and recreation, and regional transportation. In addition, citizens can take up traditional formal opportunities to serve as elected representatives on city councils, school boards, water district boards, metropolitan planning organizations, and so on.

All of these formal opportunities for real citizen participation can help urban dwellers to grow in their knowledge, skills, and democratic capacities; to expand their networks of social capital; and thus to sustain and give realistic focuses to their hopes for future-forging influence. Equally important, and closely connected, are real though informal opportunities for citizen participation in the kinds of nongovernmental, voluntary organizations that have, since the days of Tocqueville’s visit, influenced the future as well as the daily operation of American society: churches, labor unions, student groups, community service and civic improvement associations, and various issue-focused organizations that devote their energies to protecting nature and promoting social justice. Most visible of all in recent years, especially in times of crisis, cities have been sites for more limited but nonetheless real opportunities to participate in social movements and in value-expressive events that have been organized and supported by coalitions of democracy-minded nongovernmental organizations and sometimes by government officials. These continue to be starting places for raising citizen’s expectations, for building their democratic capacities, and for giving them a voice in local, national, and global futures.



Among cities that have attempted to institute more limited forms of citizen participation or even pseudoparticipation in government, failures have been frequent and their cost has been high, tending to alienate people and to undermine respect for incumbent administrations. San Antonio, Texas, however, is different from other American cities that Berry, Portney, and Thomson analyzed as models of effective citizen participation because it does not provide for official, citywide structures of neighborhood involvement in urban governance. Nonetheless, it is exemplary because an effective citizens' association representing poor, predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods—the Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS)—has succeeded over the past 25 years in becoming a respected player in shaping local and regional politics, thereby overcoming to some extent a long-term and continuing bias in favor of more affluent, better-educated Anglo neighborhoods. COPS is the oldest, largest, and most influential member organization of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), an umbrella organization reflecting a more cooperation-focused transformation of Saul Alinsky's conflict-harvesting community-organizing practices in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Growing out of the Industrial Areas Foundation Training Center that Alinsky and associates founded in 1969, IAF shapes its general principles and its situation-specific strategies by creatively illuminating a tension between "the world as it is" and "the world as it should be." San Antonio's COPS is organized along "parish" lines and, like other IAF member organizations—typically churches, labor unions, worker cooperatives, and universities—and those decision makers in government, business, and benevolent

foundations who are in a position to help them fulfill their felt democratic imperatives to create more equal economic, educational, and civic opportunities. Like those of other IAF organizations, the strategies COPS developed include information, negotiation, and public "actions" that bring large numbers of the members of community-sustaining organizations together in creative, nonviolent ways that attract media attention for the purpose of stimulating public interest and support that can, in turn, be used to influence potentially helpful decision makers. The success of COPS in influencing public policy, not only in San Antonio but also in the Texas legislature through its partnership with other local IAF organizations statewide, offers a powerful example of what community-based

Information, negotiation, and public "actions" bring members of community-sustaining organizations together in creative, nonviolent ways.

organizations, grounded in shared values that can bridge their differences in race and class, can contribute toward solving shared problems and creating "affirmative opportunities." It is important to note that differences among culturally and linguistically diverse COPS members have not been found to carry with them a "values gap" that makes them unable to understand one another and to work for shared goals, as others have led us to expect. How they reference and employ their values



may differ initially, which explains the importance of IAF's evolved conversation-framing process in helping COPS members get to know each other well enough to set shared goals, to strategize with regard to differing strengths and obstacles, and work effectively together to achieve the goals they set.

But meaningful nongovernmental opportunities for real citizen participation in shaping local, regional, state, and national futures exist in America and already have begun to prove their effectiveness. Mass protest events like those organized by Yugoslavia's Otpor, by the justice-focused movement interlinking students at many US colleges and universities, and by the worldwide movement in opposition to the preemptive war on Iraq can be very effective social instruments for expressing a clear, single-note critique. They also offer citizens a starting place for developing expectations and skills for more extensive democratic participation. However, they are not very useful as sites for developing a positive, alternative vision that draws upon citizens' more deeply democratic experiences and values.

For this kind of citizen participation in reconstructive social visioning, story-telling gatherings, and issue-specific public colloquies

that bring scholars and other citizen-thinkers together can be highly effective. These are the kinds of gatherings that already have become a part of urban planning in America, especially in long-range and comprehensive planning. This is the nature of the "town hall meetings" that were sponsored by Manhattan's Civic Alliance through its post-9/11 Listening to the City program, which involved thousands of citizens in planning for redevelopment of New York City's lower Manhattan neighborhoods, especially at the site where the World Trade Center once soared. Because of their issue-focused character and their high-tech-assisted, on-site aggregations of participants' local knowledge and judgments about the desirability of alternative future plans, such public conversations have offered opportunities for participants to develop democratic skills and capacities for wider and even more effective public future-shaping involvements. At the same time, each event has been existentially important for participants, offering them opportunities to share their stories within constructive channels for their grief and anger

Citizens from all walks of life were locked in a struggle over their right to participate in a public process.

and providing some small sense of shared control within a nightmare world that suddenly and horribly emerged as out of control. In fact, the Listening to the City gatherings that were called together to find a reconstructive response to the events of that terrible day may represent a pioneering effort to combine

the mass presence of a protest event with the face-to-face experience and opportunity to be heard individually of a town hall meeting.

The Civic Alliance of four major community organizations that sponsored the Listening to the City mass meetings and many

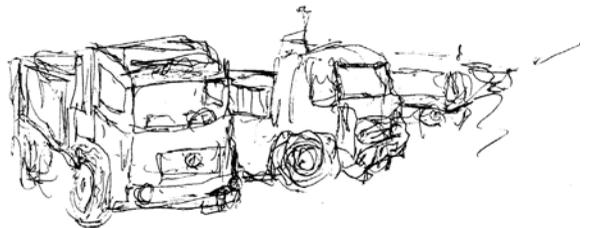
Can democratic citizen participation effectively influence the course of future events on a global scale?

other related events came together shortly after 9/11 to begin to plan a response that would give citizens democratic opportunities to be heard. Beginning in February 2002, just five months after the September 11 attacks, the Civic Alliance, with a large presence of architects and urban planners who volunteered to serve as small group facilitators, began to organize and publicize these mass events for civic participation in determining what values and visual images should guide the replacement of the World Trade Center and the design of a memorial to all those who were lost with them. Hundreds of participants turned out for the first of these meetings, and thousands more for those that followed.

From the beginning, however, these ordinary citizens from all walks of life and a wide range of ethnic, racial, religious, and generational backgrounds were locked in a struggle with their elected officials over their right to participate in such a public process. The governor of New York State, the mayor of the City of New York, appointed

representatives of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the Lower Manhattan Redevelopment Corporation, and various other national, state, and local officials asserted their legal entitlement to make all decisions concerning the site. Many of these elected and appointed officials expressed their determination to make these decisions on the basis of “expert” advice while paying attention primarily to what they regarded as the undisturbed property rights of the World Trade Center’s primary leaseholder. Of course, they were also aware that their personal political hopes and ideological commitments would be on national display in the rebuilding process. These elected and appointed officials chose a firm of architects to develop six concept designs to guide their deliberations, which went on simultaneously with, but independent of, the public process.

Nonetheless, on July 20, 2002, responding to extensive public outcry as well as pressure from the planning and architecture community and the *New York Times*, these officials acceded to the proposal to hold a Listening to the City event at which public comments on their six concept designs would be elicited. Nearly 500 professional facilitators, including representatives from all 50 American states and many other countries, arrived a day early for training, and on July 20, they welcomed 5,000 citizen participants to carefully organized roundtable conversations whose results were electronically collected, rapidly analyzed



with computer assistance, and displayed on large screens at intervals throughout the day. Some participants at the tables had lost family members on September 11. Others included survivors and eyewitnesses, people from the surrounding neighborhoods, and people from other parts of the city and the region who felt directly affected and concerned about the matters under discussion. All felt that they had been heard that day—and in their collective voice, they rejected all six concept designs and the official process by which these designs came into being so unanimously that the designs were withdrawn and the process transformed into one in which public comment became a legitimate, necessary, and influential element. This process eventually led to broad agreement on an inspiring new design for the World Trade Center site, with somewhat different functional components than those that the elected and appointed officials originally had regarded as basic and nonnegotiable.

Regrettably, most of the spaces planned for the arts and for museums were removed because of fear of controversy; and the power struggle was renewed during the memorial design process, which eventually was handed over to “experts.” How much of the citizen participants’ contribution will characterize the buildings and the memorial that eventually will replace the World Trade Center remains to be seen, and it is clear that more is at stake for both sides of this struggle than the design itself. The key factor in determining the outcome of this struggle seems likely to be the staying power of large numbers of those who thus far have expressed a deep commitment to the public participation process but whose patience has been sorely tested by delay and rejection—nonetheless, these experiences show that,



like formal sites of “second-strand” citizen participation within government, all of these informal sites—the courts, nongovernmental organizations, democratic mass movements, and issue-focused gatherings of scholars and other citizen-thinkers—can play valuable roles in shaping local and global futures, and they can become even more effective if they are consciously and creatively interwoven. I do not offer these particular examples as universal models for effecting democratic institutional and cultural change in all other countries, or even in all of the regions of the United States. Thomas Jefferson wrote: “Every people have their own particular habits, ways of thinking, manners, etc., which have grown up with them from their infancy, are become a part of their nature, and to which the regulations which are to make them happy must be accommodated. . . . The excellence of every government is its adaptation to the state of those to be governed by it.” However, contextually differing yet interrelated examples can be found in every part of the world, offering the beginnings of a global general “fund” of city-focused experience of citizen participation in processes of deepening democracy. Draw-

ing on such experiences, citizens of various nations are learning from the “best practices” of citizens of other nations.

Through the process of participating in such “urban schools” of second-strand, Jeffersonian democracy while working to achieve what Dewey called “continuously planning societies,” citizen-thinkers are educating themselves in skills, knowledge, habits, and lifeways for deepening democracy in diverse global contexts. In the process, they may profoundly influence our future—though we can have no advance certainty that their efforts will be effective and no way to know what their benefits and costs to the individuals in question may be. Thus, the question remains: is second-strand democratic

Are there official citizen powers to participate directly and continuously in determining public policy?

participation a wise choice for individual citizens in diverse global contexts, especially in places where it may involve great risks?

In these early years of the 21st century, the names of cities—Seattle, Washington, DC, Lima, Prague, Belgrade, Quebec, Genoa, New York City, London, Paris, Berlin, Jerusalem, Beijing, Baghdad—have come to signify fears, tragedies, and a hopeful but still fragile rebirth of democratic citizen participation in shaping preferable global futures. The great practical and existential questions democratic theorists and

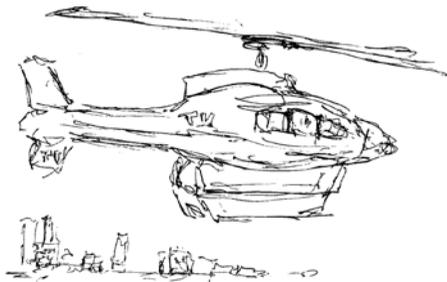
democracy-minded citizens worldwide face now focus on how to frame their continuing hopes and life choices in the wake of the great and terrible events these city names evoke. Can democratic citizen participation effectively influence the course of future events on a global scale? Are there any sites of official citizen powers to participate directly and continuously in determining public policy? Can existing participatory democratic opportunities and processes fully develop the democratic future-vision and the practical capacities that citizen-activists will need in order to raise up, inform, and lead broader democratic “publics” that can resist and correct the overwhelming influence of cultural economic elites, multinational corporations, and “democratic realists” on experienced constitutional democracies and the world’s many nondemocratic regimes? If not, how shall we live: are there “postdemocratic” stories that can help us to frame lives that are interesting, or at least tolerable, in the absence of any meaningful influence as citizens in the shaping of world futures—or must we organize ourselves into supportive but ultimately futile cells of nostalgic democratic defiance as a therapeutic alternative to depression and despair?

Reflecting on William James’ insight that the truths we most need to know sometimes cannot be warranted in advance of taking an active hypothetical belief stance concerning them, and on John Dewey’s hope for a worldwide rebirth of faith in democratic living, and Victor Frankl’s Holocaust-born insights about how to live a meaningful, even joyful life during tragic times, I advance here a threefold, “tragically melioristic” thesis. First, recent events show that there is at least a possibility that active citizen participation in efforts to deepen democracy can influence

global affairs, perhaps because many citizens recent determinations to take up wider responsibilities have been provoked by anticipated and actual tragedies that have revealed life's complex preciousness and simple fragility stimulating feelings of anger and guilt for contributing to or somehow failing to prevent great suffering, and provoked as well by hopes for a global future in which more deeply democratic visions and values prevail. Second, the development during the past 35 years of

The practical capacities of ordinary citizens to collaboratively direct their affairs have grown enormously.

many urban sites for direct citizen participation in American government at all levels, as discussed in the previous chapter, shows that broadly inclusive, locally contextualized, democratic participatory cultures can emerge and help to build democratic citizen skills and capacities with translocal implications. Third, actively nurturing these systemic possibilities, deep emotions, and emerging capabilities into more significant, future-forging influence will require more effective institutions of com-



munication, education, mutual support, and cooperation at all levels, which in turn will require countless individuals to adopt a “hypothetical faith” that citizen participation can deepen democracy in global contexts.

In many respects, our present era echoes the bleak days in the depths of the Great Depression, as the Nazis prepared to seize Europe, when John Dewey battled that era's influential proponents of a limited, “formal” democracy. Then, as now, “democratic realists” claimed that it is neither feasible nor desirable to involve citizens more actively and directly in the daily operation of democratic institutions and processes. Now, as then, advocates for democracy's “first,” representative strand treat the constitutional principles and formal institutions that arose during the Age of Revolutions in America and Western Europe as solely definitive of democracy, even though the practical capacities of ordinary citizens to collaboratively direct their affairs in which Jefferson placed his hopes for a “second,” deeper strand of democracy have grown enormously since that time. At present, however, actual capabilities for democratic citizen participation are being undermined in their emergence and in their influence by expert-guided global institutions and transnational economic, political, and military processes controlled by a small group of supremely powerful actors who seek to make client-states of almost all of the world's countries and who see no value in preserving diverse cultures, species, and aspirations for the future.

Against popular and intellectual mainstreams of his own time, Dewey argued that American democracy's constitutional principles and institutions derive their justification and their efficacy from citizens' democratic values, habits, and daily involvements in self-

governance. Lacking these, formally democratic principles and institutions are ungrounded, hollow, and readily subvertible by powerful antidemocratic forces. In “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” his 1939 speech for a celebration in honor of his 80th birthday, Dewey wrote:

The depth of the present crisis is due in considerable part to the fact that for a long period we acted as if our democracy were something that perpetuated itself automatically; as if our ancestors had succeeded in setting up a machine that solved the problem of perpetual motion in politics. We acted as if democracy were something that took place mainly at Washington and Albany—or some other state capital—under the impetus of what happened when men and women went to the polls once a year or so—which is a somewhat extreme way of saying that we have had the habit of thinking of democracy as a kind of political mechanism that will work as long as citizens were reasonably faithful in performing political duties.

Dewey argued that representative democracy needs to be balanced by what I have called “second-strand,” actively participatory democracy—by democracy as a “way of life”—and then he argued that even this analysis does not go deep enough. “Of late years we have heard more and more frequently that this is not enough: that democracy is a way of life. This saying gets down to hard pan. But I am not sure that something of the externality of the old idea does not cling to the new and better state-

ment.” Dewey’s deeper point was this: democracy’s future depends upon individual persons joining Jefferson and his transgenerational inheritors in continuing to make personal commitments of time and energy that have real “opportunity costs” and that depend for their efficacy on a critical mass of others making well-timed, convergent commitments even amid uncertainty and danger.

In fact, the efficacy of democratic personal commitments in times of crisis depends upon their pervasiveness throughout the habits and relations of daily living; this must be our ultimate focus.

In any case, we can escape from this external way of thinking only as we realize in thought and act that democracy is a personal way of individual life; that it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life. Instead of thinking of our own dispositions and habits as accommodated to certain institutions we have to learn to think of the latter as expressions, projections, and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes.

Dewey’s point was that the democratic quality of institutions ultimately depends on the dispositions, habits, and experiences in self-governance of the individual persons they serve and should reflect.

Judith Green is a professor of philosophy at Fordham University. This essay is drawn from her book, Pragmatism and Social Hope, and published here with the permission of Columbia University Press.