



a journal of positive futures

Positive Futures Network
P.O. Box 10818
Bainbridge Island, WA 98110-0818

telephone 206 842 0216
facsimile 206 842 5208
subscriptions 800 937 4451
yes@futurenet.org
www.yesmagazine.org

discussion guide
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what would democracy look like?

welcome to the *yes!* discussion guide series

YES! Discussion Guides are designed to help you explore your own experiences, opinions, and commitments as they related to material found in *YES!* magazine. We especially encourage you to use them in group discussions, classrooms, or study circles. We believe that when people gather to talk with mutual respect and caring about the critical issues of our time, they create a powerful avenue for constructive social change.

We've posted selected articles from this issue of *YES!* on our website at www.yesmagazine.org. You're welcome to download and photocopy them free of charge. If you'd like to purchase multiple copies of *YES!* or subscriptions for your class or group, please phone 1-800/937-4451 and ask for the Discussion Group Discount.

democracy in trouble

Two years after a flawed presidential election, the US still has a serious problem running elections. In November 2002, UN observers who normally supervise voting in emerging democracies were called in to assist with Florida's elections and the same list of supposed felons from the 2000 election was used to disenfranchise 90,000 voters, mostly African Americans. The president was planning to take the nation into war, and the control of a branch of government hung in the balance, as well as the power to shape another branch. Yet only 39 percent of eligible voters voted in these elections. Voters were disenchanted, uninspired, and disempowered.

But there are deeper questions for our democracy than just voting. What might it mean for everyone to have a voice in the running of our society? What is democracy and how can we get it?

This discussion guide centers on the following articles. You might want to discuss a different one at each session:

- Thom Hartmann, "American Rebellions"
- Hilikka Pietila, "Women, Citizenship, and the End of Poverty"
- Roundtable, "Instead of Empire: What Future for the United States?"
- Various, "Deliberative Democracy"
- Vandana Shiva: "Earth Democracy"

american rebellions

Thom Hartmann argues that the Boston Tea Party was an act of rebellion against a government-supported corporation. He traces the struggle against corporations through Thomas Jefferson, to the granting of corporate "personhood" by a flawed Supreme Court case in 1868, and down to our own time, when corporate power is immense and affects every aspect of our daily lives.

- How does this description of the Boston Tea Party and the events that led to the American Revolution fit with the way you understand these events? How were you taught about these events in grade school? How would you describe the fundamental principles the US Revolution was fought to secure?

- What kind of power do corporations have in your community? What companies might you compare to the East Company and do any of these have a presence in your community?



Hartmann mentions that several townships in Pennsylvania have passed anti-corporate farming initiatives (voters in South Dakota recently reaffirmed a similar law).

- What kind of steps are people in your community taking to restrain the power of corporations? What creative ways might Americans rebel against the power of corporations?

citizenship and the end of poverty

Although Finland is a small country, far to the north and without colonies from which to extract wealth, it pulled itself out of poverty and became one of the world's wealthiest nations by the end of the 20th century. At the same time the Finns share their wealth more equally than any nation.

How did we do this? asks Hilkka Pietila.

The answers are that the two achievements depended on each other; wealth was created by a strong welfare system that produced a productive, healthy, educated workforce. Finland has a social contract among its citizens, a belief that the well being of each depends on supporting the welfare of all, which in practice means redistribution of wealth to those who need care or assistance in giving care—children, the elderly, women. This is in strong contrast to the United States.

- What has been your experience in acquiring and paying for services that in Finland are provided to all residents: health care, education, child care, or elder care? Have you ever had to struggle to get these services?
- How would your life be different if you had no fear of falling into poverty or being uncared for in a time of need?
- Would you be willing to pay higher taxes to ensure this? Why or why not?
- How would you describe the US' social contract? Who benefits and who loses in the Finnish system? In the US system?
 - Is the power to earn a living what earns a member standing in a community? What value do members of a society who are unable to earn a living have? Who should be responsible for those who are dependent?
 - What barriers are there to providing the same level of security found in the Finnish system in the US? Could it ever happen here?

instead of empire

In October, the US Congress voted overwhelmingly to give the president the authority to make war against Iraq. This would mark the first application of the new Bush Doctrine of the right of preemptive, or even preventive, war. The doctrine document points out that these are new times, with new and more amorphous threats that are not bound by national borders and require new responses. The religious leaders, diplomat, policy analyst, and futurist gathered by *YES!* argue that the Bush policies are likely to make the US less, not more secure, and that there are alternatives that can make us safer.

- What makes you feel unsafe? What makes you feel safe? How has that changed in the last few years?
- The US spends about the same amount on the military as the next 20 military powers combined, including our allies. Does the world need the US to act as an empire in order to keep the peace? What might a world without empire look like?
 - Some people have felt a renewed sense of national purpose and national unity since 9/11, but many have not. What has changed for you in terms of your feeling about the US and your own sense of belonging? How have different people experienced this heightened sense of patriotism? What are your views about the possible sources of national purpose proposed by the roundtable participants (see page 52).

deliberative democracy

This collection of short articles offers ideas for improving our methods of making decisions that affect us all, from voting to study circles to citizen panels.

- What experiences have you had with different ways of making decisions? Which have been most successful and yielded results that were better (wiser) than the individuals might have done on their own? Have you also experienced processes that dumbed down the intelligence in the room and resulted in poor outcomes?
 - When you needed action taken that you could not do alone, how did you recruit others to work on the project with you, and how did you decide what should be done?
 - Only a small percentage of Americans vote. Do you vote? Why or why not? Do you feel that you have a way to get involved in discussing the issues during campaigns? How do you think the level of debate could be raised?

- What structures are there for making decisions in your workplace? What institutions have you found helpful (such as churches, newspapers, community groups, etc.) as you or your community make decisions? What is the quality of debate in your community? Who is heard? Who is not? Who gets a say in decisions? What divisions are there within the community and how does that affect decision-making?

hope in hard times

For many who are concerned with making the world a more just, sustainable, and compassionate place, these are discouraging times. In her interview with Vandana Shiva, Sarah van Gelder asked Shiva how she retains so much energy and commitment to action. This was her answer:

“Well, it’s always a mystery, because you don’t know why you get depleted or recharged. But, this much I know. I do not allow myself to be overcome by hopelessness, no matter how tough the situation. I believe that if you just do your little bit without thinking of the bigness of what you stand against, if you turn to the enlargement of your own capacities, just that in itself creates new potential.

“And I’ve learned from the Bhagavad Gita and other teachings of our culture to detach myself from the results of what I do, because those are not in my hands. The context is not in your control, but your commitment is yours to make, and you can make the deepest commitment with a total detachment about where it will take you. You want it to lead to a better world, and you shape your actions and take full responsibility for them, but then you have detachment. And that combination of deep passion and deep detachment allows me always to take on the next challenge because I don’t cripple myself, I don’t tie myself in knots. I function like a free being. I think getting that freedom is a social duty because I think we owe it to each other not to burden each other with prescription and demands. I think what we owe each other is a celebration of life and to replace fear and hopelessness with fearlessness and joy.”

- What ways do you stay hopeful in dark times? What keeps you acting on what you believe when success seems distant or unlikely? What can (or do) you do to help friends and co-workers keep their spirits up?

We welcome feedback on your experience in using our discussion guides. Email comments to DiscussionGuides@futurenet.org. Download additional copies of this guide at www.yesmagazine.org. YES! is published by the Positive Futures Network, an independent, non-profit organization whose mission is to support people’s active engagement in creating a more just, sustainable, and compassionate world.

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