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Book Review
Democracy's Edge
Choosing to Save Our Country by Bringing Democracy to Life
by Frances Moore Lappe

Reviewer: Geoff Wisner, Staff Reviewer
Posted: November 17, 2005

There are a lot of books out there — including a whole library about the Bush administration — that tell you what's wrong with things today. There are relatively few that tell you what's being done about it.
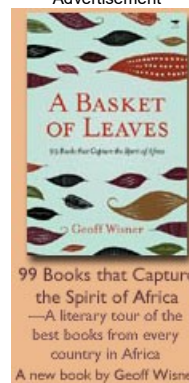
What makes *Democracy's Edge* so refreshing and so valuable — and sometimes a bit exhausting — is that it is packed with hundreds of examples of ways in which people in the U.S. are working to decentralize power and promote democracy. Frances Moore Lappé does spend some time outlining what's wrong, using some well-chosen data. Personal bankruptcies are up by a third since 2000, half of them triggered by paying for a health crisis. The net worth of the top 1% of the population rose by 63% in the 1980s and 1990s, while the net worth of the bottom 40% dropped by 44%. More than 40% of independent bookstores closed in the last decade. Corporations' share of federal income tax has dropped from 50% to 14% since 1940. And so on.

The heart of the book, though, lies in its success stories, many of them first reported through the American News Service, which Lappé created in 1995. Here are just a few of the many intriguing facts and stories in the book, many of which deserve books of their own:

• By co-endorsing candidates from other parties, as well as running candidates of its own, the Working Families party is building a constituency for progressive values that aren't always addressed by the Democrats. (My own city council representative was elected by Working Families.)

• Instant runoff elections, adopted in five American cities so far, make it possible to vote for the person you really want without having your vote "wasted" if that person loses. Once a candidate has been eliminated, voters' second-choice ballots are taken into account.

• You can measure your ecological impact at www.myfootprint.org, get a pollution report for your county at www.scorecard.org, and get social and environmental ratings of consumer companies at www.idealswork.com.

• Municipalities have been defending themselves against pollution and overdevelopment by declaring that corporations in their jurisdictions will no longer be considered "persons" with constitutional rights.

• In cities including Portland, Seattle, and St. Paul, citizens' councils and "little city halls" are involving citizens in proposing ideas, "from painting murals to deter graffiti to restoring wetlands to creating an oral history show," and carrying them out.

• Rooftop Films in New York City is creating an audience for movies that, as one film buff wrote, "would NEVER get seen by ANY audience of ANY size ANYWHERE."

• At a time when almost three-quarters of the authorities cited on network news with identifiable party affiliations are Republicans, Amy Goodman's progressive show Democracy Now! reaches more than 170 radio stations plus TV viewers. (Oddly, *Democracy's Edge* doesn't mention the Air America radio network.)

• Former Windows on the World workers have founded a worker-owned restaurant in Greenwich Village called Colors, which is intended to create "a sense of place and comfort that has been missing in Lower Manhattan since September 11."

• Prisoners who get education, drug treatment, and job training through a San Francisco program called RSVP are 83% less likely to be rearrested for a violent crime one year after their release.

Though *Democracy's Edge* is not designed to go deeply into any of the subjects it covers, it is an excellent snapshot of where efforts at democratization stand in 2005, and it is well supplied with notes and websites that make it easy to dig deeper.