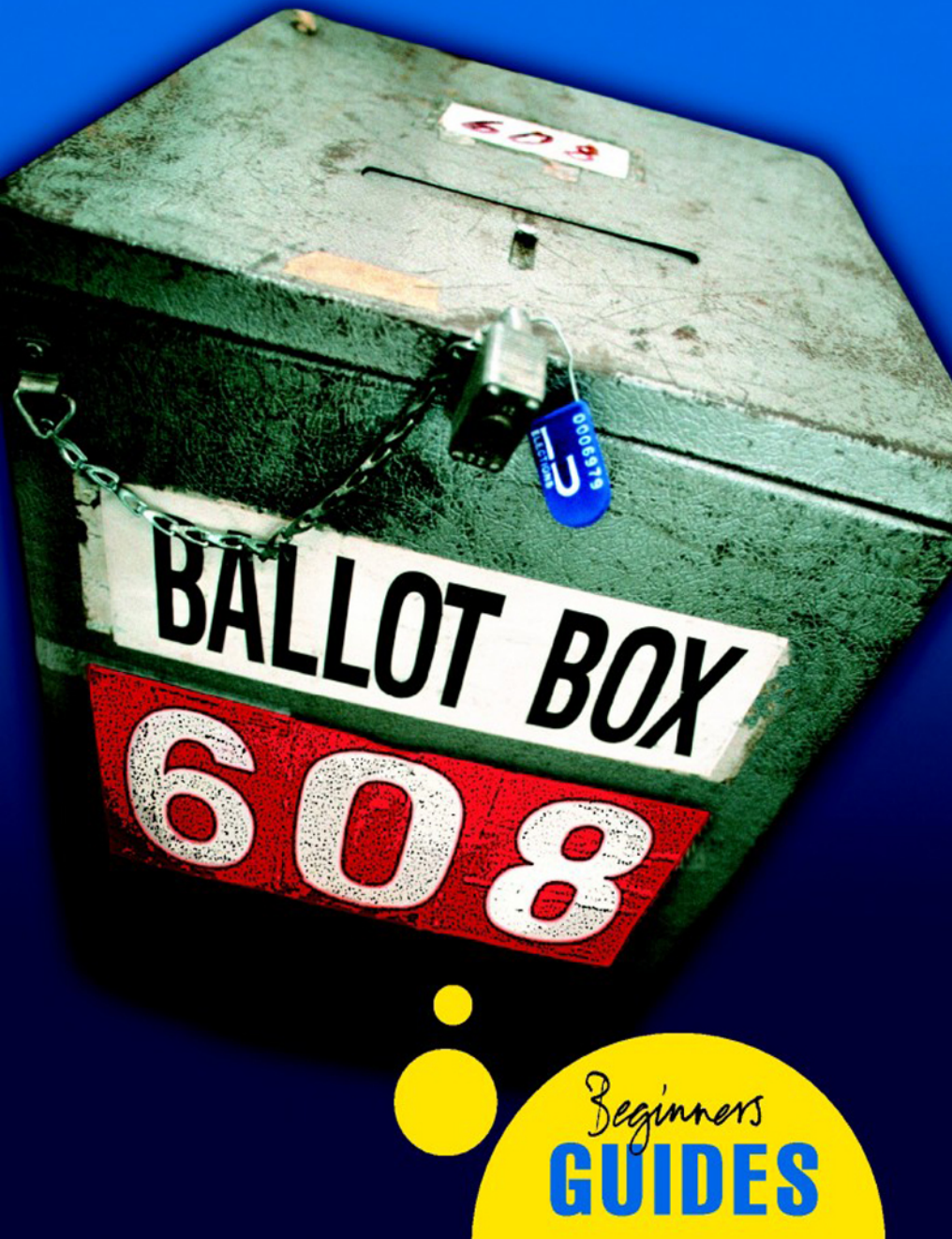


David Beetham

# Democracy



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# democracy

a beginner's guide

david beetham



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## democracy: a beginner's guide

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# preface and acknowledgements

What is democracy? What are its key features? Why are so many people in the 'old' democracies of the West disillusioned with it? Why is it so difficult to consolidate democratic government in other parts of the world? How can international organisations be democratised, if at all? What can we do to improve the quality of our own democracies?

These are the kinds of question this book will discuss. Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the definition and justification of democracy, and explore what is needed to realise it in practice at the level of the national state. These two chapters are relatively positive and 'upbeat' in tone. In more critical vein, chapters 3 and 4 explore the sources of disillusion with democracy in the 'old' democracies, and the problems of achieving sustainable democratic government in the rest of the world. Chapter 5 assesses schemes for extending democracy to the international sphere. Chapters 6 and 7 review attempts to re-engage citizens with government through innovations in participatory democracy, and ask what we can do as citizens to contribute to democratic renewal. I have then added a substantial glossary of key terms used in democratic discourse, which can form a guide to democracy in its own right. This is followed by a list of useful organisations and web-sites for readers to access if they wish.

The book is the fruit of more than two decades of teaching about democracy to students, practitioners and activists. Much of what I have learnt has come from their questions and insights, especially from those living in the 'new' democracies. I have more specific

debts to acknowledge to a number of people who have commented on draft chapters, especially to John Schwarzmantel and Stuart Weir; and to Jules Townshend, who commented on the text as a whole. Any remaining defects are of course my own responsibility. I owe a particular debt to Iain Kearton, who prepared the tables and figures. Finally, I wish to thank Victoria Roddam, of Oneworld Publications, who invited me to write the book, and who has been both a support and an effective gadfly ever since.

David Beetham, September 2004

# introduction: what is democracy?

What is democracy? You probably already have your own answer to this question. Most people do. The trouble is, their answers tend to be quite different from one another. Here, for example, is a list of some of the things people have called 'democracy' over the past fifty years or so: rule of the people, rule of the people's representatives, rule of the people's party, the well-being of the people, majority rule, dictatorship of the proletariat, maximum political participation, élite competition for the people's vote, multi-partyism, political and social pluralism, equal citizenship rights, civil and political liberties, a free or open society, a civil society, a free market economy, whatever we do in the UK or USA, the 'end of history', all things bright and beautiful.

What explains this enormous variety of meanings? One reason is that there are many different facets to democracy in practice, and people are isolating one element and treating it as if it were the whole. Another reason is that, because we are all in favour of democracy, it has become the most general term of approval in the political lexicon, and so has become emptied of all content; democracy is whatever we choose it to mean. Even the most ruthless dictators will claim the mantle of democracy, because they are carrying out the 'true will of the people'; dictatorship is just their country's own distinctive way of practising democracy!

No one is against democracy today, and everyone claims to be 'democratic'. It was not always so. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were many opponents of democracy, who believed it

was a thoroughly bad thing. But at least they agreed with democracy's supporters what it actually was; they just disagreed about how to value it as a way of running society. These value disagreements still exist today, but they have become disguised as disagreements about what democracy *means*, since no one will come out openly and say that they are against it. So let us go back and try to recover an original meaning to the idea of democracy, and consider why its opponents thought it was such a bad thing. I shall start as simply as I can.

## the meaning of democracy

Democracy can be most simply understood as a procedure for taking decisions in any group, association or society, whereby all members have an equal right to have a say and to make their opinions count. In life we take many decisions as individuals – where and how to live, what job to pursue, how much of our income to spend, what to spend it on, and so on. But as soon as we join with others in some common activity or enterprise, then decisions have to be taken for the group or association as a whole: who should be a member, what rules should be followed, what goals or policies should be pursued, how any necessary income should be raised or work distributed. We could call these 'collective decisions', in contrast to the individual decisions outlined above.

Now it is a standard feature of collective decisions to be taken at any level, from the smallest group or association up to society as a whole, that people disagree about them. So some procedure or decisional rule is required to determine how such disagreements should be resolved, and who is allowed to take part in doing so. In most associational life throughout human history the vast majority of those affected by collective decisions have been excluded from any participation in them. Decisions have been the preserve of a very few: the wisest, the oldest, the wealthiest, the most expert, or simply those with the most physical force at their disposal to coerce the rest. As forms of societal rule or government these examples of rule by the few have carried distinctive names such as aristocracy, meritocracy, oligarchy, and so on. And where decisions have been the preserve of a single individual, the system of rule has historically been called a monarchy.

In contrast to these historically recurrent forms of collective decision making by one or a few persons on behalf of the rest, democracy involves the principle that all members of an association or society should have the right to take part equally in the decisions that affect them. Democracy is based on the following key ideas:

- All members have interests that are affected by collective decisions.
- Everyone (by the time they are adult) is capable of reaching a view about what the best or least bad decision would be, both for themselves and for the association as a whole.
- The best decisions over the long run will be ones where all such views have been publicly aired and debated.
- Where debate and discussion fail to produce a single agreed outcome, decisions should be taken by a vote of all participating members.
- The principle of ‘one person, one vote, one value’ reflects a wider conception that all persons are of equal worth.

Naturally, these ideas require further discussion, and will be elaborated on during the course of the book. It is worth pointing out straightaway, however, that they have historically only very rarely been either believed in or practised. Even in ancient Athens of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, which gave us the word ‘democracy’ (rule by the common people, ‘kratos’ by the ‘demos’), the ‘people’ did not include either women or slaves, both of whom were believed to be naturally inferior to male citizens. Indeed, it would have been impossible in practice for male citizens to have devoted the time they did to the collective affairs of their city, if there had not been a large supporting cast working full time on domestic and economically productive activities.

Despite this serious limitation, however, ancient Athens, and its democratic allies in cities across the Aegean, provided two key features which have been an inspiration to democrats ever since. The first was an effective working example of a popular assembly, in which ordinary citizens debated and decided laws and policies for their society in person, including issues of peace and war. Other democratic practices included the rotation of citizens in turn, selected by lot, to serve on an executive body or council, and to act as jurors in the courts. This model of popular self-government, of people controlling their own common affairs, survived for a century

and a half, and demonstrated that public debate and disagreement were not incompatible with effective policy or decisive collective action. Moreover, its atmosphere of open enquiry and discussion led to a unique flowering of art, drama, literature, philosophy and the sciences.

A second exemplary feature of Athenian democracy was the robust defence its supporters provided for the principle that poor citizens were every bit as capable as the well-to-do of deliberating and voting on issues of public policy. 'We give no special power to wealth,' says the Athenian in one of Euripides' plays: 'the poor man's voice commands equal authority.' 'No one,' says Pericles in the famous funeral speech at the end of the first year of the war with Sparta, 'so long as he has it in him to be of service to the city, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty.'

Aristocrats and élitists then and ever since have regarded this principle as scandalous, even politically ruinous. Only the few can know what is really good for society. The philosopher Plato likened democracy to a ship in which an inexperienced crew had seized the helm from the ship's captain, and consumed all the supplies in a drunken orgy while the ship drifted onto the rocks. In his view only philosophers, who had experienced long years of education in the knowledge of what was good for man and society, were fit rulers of a city. Democracy's supporters responded with the argument that a capacity for moral awareness and recognition of the public interest were common to all citizens as members of society, and were not the subject of any special expertise. Experts might be required for special public tasks – shipwrights, architects, engineers, etc. – but it was for the citizens themselves to decide whether and when these should be carried out. 'The cobbler makes the shoe, but only the wearer can tell where it pinches' sums up this view.

There was another argument in support of democracy, which was developed much further in modern times. Even if the special few could know what was in other people's interests better than they did themselves (which they couldn't), what incentive could they possibly have to pursue it, rather than their own interests? They might start by trying to do so, but their efforts would inevitably degenerate under the corrupting influence of power. So there was a protective argument for democracy – protecting people against the corrupting effects of power on the few – to add to the positive argument, that only by empowering the people to take their own decisions could the public good be realised.

## direct and representative democracy

A confidence in ordinary people's capacity to take reasoned decisions about their own lives and, by extension, the life of the communities in which they live has always formed the bedrock of democratic thinking. However, the classical Athenian practice of giving every citizen the right to take part in public decisions in person was only possible because of the relatively small size of the city-state, which allowed its citizens to assemble together in one place. The size of the modern state makes this simply impractical, and today we think of democracy as a system of government in which citizens elect political representatives to a local or national assembly to take decisions on policy and legislation on their behalf: this is called 'representative' rather than 'direct' democracy.

Is such a system really democratic? Is it not just another example of rule by the few over the rest of society, i.e. a form of oligarchy, in which a powerful group takes decisions for everyone else? Many of the protagonists of modern representative government, from the time of the US revolution in the eighteenth century onwards, have seen the signal advantage of a representative system to lie in the fact that it is not really 'democratic': that elected representatives, typically persons of superior judgement, are able to arrive at decisions on law and policy independently of the pressures of popular opinion.

So James Madison, in the US *Federalist Papers*, wrote that, by delegating government to a small number of citizens 'whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country ... the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves.' And Edmund Burke, addressing the electors of Bristol who had just voted him to Parliament, insisted that it was the task of an elected representative to decide national issues as he thought best, not as the opinion of his constituents might direct. 'Your representative', he said in a famous passage, 'owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.' The logical counterpart to this assertion was that electors should be content 'to be governed by the superior wisdom of representatives', as J.S. Mill put it in his classic mid-nineteenth-century work on representative government. Or, as expressed even more forcibly by Joseph Schumpeter in the



mid-twentieth century, the voters 'must understand that, once they have elected an individual, political action is his business and not theirs'.

These accounts of representative government do not sound particularly democratic, since they seem to reject the basic principle that everyone is equally entitled to express their opinion and have it considered. What differentiates our representatives from the rest of us is not that they have some superior qualities which others do not possess, but that they are given the necessary *time* to deliberate and decide public issues in our place and on our behalf. But in a democracy they still have to listen to and take notice of the rest of us.

This is only one of the many features that distinguish a system of representative democracy from an oligarchy, or 'rule by the few'. It will be useful to set out what these major differences are. Under a democracy:

- Any citizen can in principle stand for elective office, as opposed to office being restricted to those with special qualifications or attributes.
- Key public office holders are elected by universal and equal suffrage, as opposed to being appointed.
- There is freedom of expression and a pluralism of independent media, contributing to energetic public debate, as opposed to officially controlled media with censorship restrictions.
- There is public access to official information about what government is doing, and a variety of sources of independent expertise as a check on government, as opposed to government secrecy and monopolisation of information.
- Citizens are free as of right to organise themselves and further their interests and values in a variety of associations, as opposed to this being a privilege which can be withdrawn at will.
- There are many different channels through which electors can seek to make their views known to their representatives, and seek to influence them, as opposed to communication simply being from the top downwards.
- Citizens have the right to vote directly on constitutional changes affecting their powers and those of their representatives, as opposed to constitutional changes being determined by others.
- All these rights are legally guaranteed, and the law is enforced by judges who are independent of the government of the day.

These differences are summarised in the accompanying box:

DEMOCRACY	OLIGARCHY
Public office open to all.	Office restricted to those with special attributes or qualifications.
Selection for office by election.	Selection for office by appointment.
Freedom of expression and media.	Censorship and controlled media.
Access to official information.	Public office protected by secrecy.
Free associational life.	Association a privilege.
Channels of upward influence.	Communication only downwards.
Direct vote on constitutional change.	Constitutional change decided by élite.
Rights enforced by independent judges.	Judges subordinate to the government.

Now it may well be that not all the features in the left-hand column are fully realised in democracies as we experience them, and this will be a subject for later chapters. Representative democracies often show oligarchic tendencies. Yet in principle there is a radical difference between the two types of regime. And it should be clear from this contrast that what distinguishes representative democracy from oligarchy is not just how office holders are selected, or who may stand for public office. It is also that representative democracies depend upon a continuously active citizen body if they are to function in a *democratic* way. This means that we should not pose too sharp an antithesis between representative and direct democracy. For representative government to be genuinely democratic, it requires a continual input of direct democracy on the part of active and concerned citizens.

## collective action and individual choice

The contrast that I have been making can be illustrated by comparing the sphere of government and politics in a democracy with that

of economic companies and businesses. These are typically oligarchies, and their system of governance has all the attributes of the right-hand column in the box above. Admittedly, elements of democracy appear, but usually only at the margin. So-called shareholder democracy is largely a sham, since it is dominated by a handful of investment funds, and the influence of workers through trade unions is narrowly circumscribed and typically accepted on sufferance. In the economic sphere, however, a system of oligarchy is usually seen as an advantage: it makes for economic efficiency, and follows naturally from the institution of private ownership. The wider accountability of businesses to society is in principle secured by two mechanisms: through a system of regulation enacted and enforced by government, and by their responsiveness to consumer demand in a competitive market-place. Companies that fail to provide the consumer with what he or she demands will not stay in business for long.

Some people call the power of consumer demand 'consumer democracy'. It is certainly a form of power, but to call it 'democracy' is a misnomer. Not only is it characterised by enormous *inequalities* of wealth and spending power, whereas the democratic principle is that of political equality, but, more importantly, the decisions on which that power is based are *individual* and *private*, rather than *collective* and *public* ones.

Here we return to a basic distinction between individual and collective decision making, which was raised at the outset. The distinction is central to understanding what democracy is about. Collective decisions are decisions taken for a group, association, or society as a whole. Since there is usually disagreement about what the best decision is, they typically involve discussion, argument and the demand for evidence, and they need an agreed method for reaching these decisions. The power of members in a democracy is twofold: that of *voting*, either directly on matters for decision, or to choose the decision makers; and that of *voice*, of contributing to and influencing the discussion. And this usually requires joining with like-minded others to make your voice and vote more effective than it would be on its own.

Consumer decisions, by contrast, are typically individual ones, and the power they involve is what is called the power of 'exit' rather than 'voice': if you are not satisfied with what you have bought, you withdraw your custom, buy a different brand, or shop somewhere else. Cumulatively, it is true, the sum of individual decisions may

produce a *collective outcome*, in increasing or declining sales and profits for a company, or even the collapse of its business. But this is not the result of a conscious public process of collective decision making, involving discussion and argument. Even the act of voting for a representative, which has sometimes been likened to an individual and private choice between different products in the political market-place, takes place in the context of fierce public debate and the purposive association of like-minded citizens to influence the outcome.

It is these that are the characteristic features of democracy. At the governmental level, most of us do not have the opportunity of 'exit'. We cannot, in practice, emigrate, and even though we may choose the precise locality where we live in our country, once we have chosen we are necessarily subject to the government of that locality. We cannot avoid its taxes, or the effects of its decisions. So what power do we have if, say, a planning decision is coming up which will reduce the area of open recreational space in our neighbourhood, or allow an inappropriate multi-storey building in our residential street? We can lobby our elected councillor, mobilise our neighbours, join a local residents' or civic association, contact the local press, organise a demonstration at the local planning office, and so on. These are the typical democratic powers of voice and, ultimately, vote, in association with like-minded others – powers which can be used positively, to campaign for some new local facility, as well as obstructively.

Of course, these activities take time. So does the time we take in shopping. In comparison with shopping, however, the outcome is more uncertain. It is in the nature of collective decisions that they involve compromise with the views and interests of others, and that we can rarely get everything we want, even if we make our voices heard. This may seem like a big disadvantage in comparison with individual decisions, where our personal preferences reign supreme and we are accountable only to ourselves. However, decisions affecting whole groups of people are an inescapable feature of social life, and they determine the context and the limits within which our individual choices are set. The central issue of democracy is who is involved in these decisions, and how they come to be taken.

It is especially important to insist on this collective dimension of democracy, because we live in an age when maximising the freedom of individual choice has become an almost self-evident goal of public policy, and has become equated with democracy itself.

Freedom to choose is the contemporary mantra: to choose what cars to buy and when and where to drive them, which exotic places to go to on holiday, which schools our children should attend, which hospitals we should choose for treatment when we are ill, and so on. Yet the sum of these individual choices has collective consequences, sometimes quite damaging ones. Unrestricted use of cars causes gridlock on the roads and renders public transport uneconomic. Unlimited choice of air travel is a major contributor to global warming. Individual choice in health and education means that some schools and hospitals become oversubscribed, while others enter a downward spiral of deterioration and inadequate resourcing. At some point these consequences have to be addressed directly and made the subject of public discussion and decision. It is then that democracy comes into play.

In conclusion, then, democracy belongs to the sphere of collective and public decisions, rather than individual and private ones. It is based on: the principle of equality between members and equal citizenship; full information and free discussion on all issues for collective decision; the citizen powers of voice and vote in association with others; and the right to stand for key elective office, and to hold elected representatives accountable for their decisions. We could call these for short the principles of *popular control* of public decision making and decision makers, and *political equality*. They are equally applicable to a small local association and to the government of a large state.

Let us then review the definitions of democracy with which we began, in the light of these two principles. Some of the definitions only address one of our principles (rule of the people, equal citizenship rights); some concentrate only on the freedom aspect of democracy (civil and political liberties); some refer to the institutions through which these principles are realised (multi-partyism, a civil society); some equate democracy with one of its social conditions (a free-market economy), or one of its outcomes (the well-being of the people); some give democracy an oligarchic twist (élite competition for the people's vote), and some have little to do with democracy at all (the end of history, etc.). Our principles can thus give us a guide through the maze of competing definitions which will otherwise confuse us, or lead us to believe, erroneously, that one person's definition is as good as any other's.

Although starting with basic principles is the best way to reach a coherent definition of democracy, however, we need to go on to

consider the institutional arrangements through which these principles can be realised at the level of the national state. This will form the subject of the following chapter.

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# democratic ideas in practice

In the Introduction I suggested that democracy can best be understood as a set of ideas or principles governing how collective decisions should be made. These are the ideas of: open discussion between competing views; the equal right of members to have a say, to elect office holders from among them and to influence their deliberations; the freedom to associate with others so that the influence of vote and voice can be made more effective. In this chapter we shall look more closely at the practical arrangements which have been developed over generations to give effect to these ideas at the level of a whole society's government. I shall consider three different aspects of these arrangements: a framework of citizen rights; institutions of representative and accountable government; and the associations of what is called 'civil society' and their relation to government.

## citizen rights

The starting-point of democratic government is with the citizen – that is, with you and me. It is from us that members of a government acquire their jobs and the tax revenues to perform their work on our behalf. It is to us that they are continually looking for endorsement of their actions and policies, and to us that they are at the end of the day accountable. But this only happens because as citizens we have certain rights which do not depend on the government of the day,

and which cannot be taken away by them. These rights should be seen as the foundation of democracy. They are the rights of free expression and enquiry, of free association and communication with others, of public assembly, and of course the right to elect a parliament and government and know what they are doing in our name. Underpinning all of these is the right to security of our person and possessions, so that these cannot be threatened, harmed or seized by government except through due legal process.

Nowadays, those of us who live in the 'old' democracies take these rights for granted. Yet they are not realised or respected everywhere in the world today, and they did not exist in previous centuries, even in Western societies. They are the result of struggles of the common people, often at considerable cost to themselves, to limit the power of oligarchic and oppressive regimes, and to make government more publicly accountable and responsive to the whole community. We cannot fully appreciate the significance of these rights without understanding something about the history of the struggles that led to their establishment, and the kind of threats to personal freedom and well-being against which they were seen to provide a much-needed protection.

### the struggle against oppressive government

What were these struggles? We could distinguish three phases of popular struggle for democracy in modern Europe and America, though they often overlapped. One set of struggles was to limit the abuses of aristocratic and monarchical governments, and make them more representative and accountable to a wider public. Typical abuses were those of arbitrary arrest, detention without trial, torture in detention, confiscation of property, forcible taxation, censorship, the seizure of offending publications, government by decree rather than a proper law-making process. These have been the measures used by oppressive regimes throughout history against political opponents and anyone expressing subversive ideas. And it was the determination never to experience them again that led to the US *Bill of Rights* and the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* in France after the revolution in 1789. These lists of rights conform closely to the catalogue of abuses against which their authors were seeking protection (see extracts in box, p. 14). They also form a central component of contemporary human rights conventions, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the



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