In Defense of Modernity

François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire

In these two selections, Voltaire provides the more characteristic Enlightenment perspective on historical progress. The first, a selection from his 1754 Essay on the Manners and Spirits of Nations, *is noteworthy for its famous characterization of history as a "collection of crimes, follies, and misfortunes," as well as for its sympathetic reading of Asian cultures. The second selection is a letter Voltaire wrote in 1755 to Rousseau in response to his indictment of progress.*

I have now gone through the immense scene of revolutions that the world has experienced since the time of Charlemagne; and to what have they all tended? To desolation, and the loss of millions of lives! Every great event has been a capital misfortune. History has kept no account of times of peace and tranquillity; it relates only ravages and disasters.

We have beheld our Europe overspread with barbarians after the fall of the Roman Empire; and these barbarians, after becoming Christians, continually at war with the Mohammedans or else destroying each other.

We have seen Italy desolated by perpetual wars between city and city; the Guelphs and Ghibellines mutually destroying each other; whole ages of conspiracies, and successive eruptions of distant nations who have passed the Alps, and driven each other from their settlements by turns, till at length, in all this beautiful and extensive country, there remained only two states of any importance governed by their own natives—Venice and Rome. The others, namely, Naples, Sicily, Milan, Parma, Placentia, and Tuscany, are under the dominion of foreigners.

The other great states of Christendom have suffered equally by wars and internecine commotions; but none of them has been brought under subjection to a neighboring power. The result of these endless disturbances and perpetual jars has been only the separating of some small provinces from one state, to be transferred to another. Flanders, for example, formerly under the suzerainty of France, passed to the house of Burgundy from foreign hands, and from this house to that of Austria; and a small part of this Flanders came again into the hands of the French in the reign of Louis XIV. Several provinces of ancient Gaul were in former times dismembered. Alsace, which was a part of ancient Gaul, became a province of Germany, and is at this day a province of France. Upper Navarre, which should be a demesne of the elder branch of the house of Bourbon, belongs to the younger; and Roussillon, which formerly belonged to the Spaniards, now belongs to the crown of France.

During all these shocks, there have been formed since the time of Charlemagne only two absolutely independent republics—that of Switzerland and that of Holland.

No one great kingdom has been able to subdue another. France, notwithstanding the conquests of Edward III and Henry V; notwithstanding the victories and efforts of Charles V and Philip II, has still preserved its limits, and even extended them; Spain, Germany, Great Britain, Poland, and the northern states are nearly as they were formerly.

What then have been the fruits of the blood of so many millions of men shed in battle, and the sacking of so many cities? Nothing great or considerable. The Christian powers have lost a great deal to the Turks, within these five centuries, and have gained scarcely anything from each other.

All history, then, in short, is little else than a long succession of useless cruelties; and if there happens any great revolution, it will bury the remembrance of all past disputes, wars, and fraudulent treaties, which have produced so many transitory miseries.

In the number of these miseries we may with justice include the disturbances and civil wars on the score of religion. Of these Europe has experienced two kinds, and it is hard to say which of them has proved more fatal to her. The first, as we have already seen, was the dispute of the popes with the emperors and kings: this began in the time of Louis the Feeble, and was not entirely at an end, in Germany, till after the reign of Charles V, in England, till suppressed by the resolution of Queen Elizabeth, and in France, till the submission of Henry IV. The other source of so much bloodshed was the rage of dogmatizing. This has caused the subversion of more than one state, from the time of the massacre of the Albigenses to the thirteenth century, and from the small war of the Cévennois to the beginning of the eighteenth. The field and the scaffold ran with blood on account of theological arguments, sometimes in one century, sometimes in another, for almost five hundred years, without interruption; and the long continuance of this dreadful scourge was owing to the fact that morality was always neglected to indulge a spirit of dogmatizing.

It must once again be acknowledged that history in general is a collection of crimes, follies, and misfortunes, among which we have now and then met with a few virtues, and some happy times; as we sometimes see a few scattered huts in a barren desert.

In those times of darkness and ignorance, which we distinguish by the name of the Middle Ages, no one perhaps ever deserved so well of mankind as Pope Alexander VIII. It was he who abolished vassalage, in a council which he held in the twelfth century. It was he who triumphed in Venice by his prudence, over the brutal violence of Frederick Barbarossa, and who obliged Henry II of England to ask pardon of God and man for the murder of Thomas a Becket. He restored the rights of the people, and chastised the wickedness of crowned heads. We have had occasion to remark that before this time, all Europe, a very small

number of cities excepted, was divided between two ranks of people—the lords or owners of lands, either ecclesiastical or secular, and the villeins, or slaves. The lawyers, who assisted the knights, bailiffs, and stewards of fiefs, in giving their sentences, were in fact, no other than bondmen, or villeins, themselves. And, if mankind at length enjoy their rights, it is to Pope Alexander VIII that they are chiefly indebted for this happy change. It is to him that so many cities owe their present splendor; nevertheless, we know that this liberty was not universally extended. It has never made its way into Poland; the husbandman there is still a slave, and confined to the glebe; it is the same in Bohemia, Swabia, and several other countries of Germany; and even in France, in some of the provinces the most remote from the capital, we still see remains of this slavery. There are some chapters and monks who claim a right to all the goods of the peasants.

In Asia, on the contrary, there are no slaves but those which are purchased with money, or taken prisoners in battle. In the Christian states of Europe they do not buy slaves, neither do they reduce their prisoners of war to a state of servitude. The Asiatics have only a domestic servitude; Christians only a civil one. The peasant in Poland is a bond-man in the lands, but not in the house of his lord. We make household slaves only of the Negroes; we are severely reproached for this kind of traffic, but the people who make a trade of selling their children are certainly more blamable than those who purchase them, and this traffic is only a proof of our superiority. He who voluntarily subjects himself to a master is designed by nature for a slave.

We have seen that, from time immemorial, they have tolerated all religions in Asia, much as is at present done in England, Holland, and Germany. We have observed that this toleration was more general in Japan than in any other country whatever, till the fatal affair which rendered that government so inexorable.

We may have observed, in the course of so many revolutions, that several nations almost entirely savage have been formed both in Europe and Asia, in those very countries which were formerly the most civilized. Thus, some of the islands of the Archipelago, which were once so flourishing, are now little better than Indian habitations in America. The country where were formerly the cities of Artaxata, and Tigranocerta, have not now even half the value of some of our petty colonies. There are, in some of the islands, forests, and mountains in the very heart of Europe, a set of people who are in nothing superior to those of Canada, or the Negroes of Africa. The Turks are more civilized, but we hardly know of one city built by them; they have suffered the most noble and beautiful monuments of antiquity to fall to decay, and reign only over a pile of ruins.

They have nothing in Asia that in the least resembles our European nobility; nor is there to be found throughout the whole East any one order of citizens distinguished from the others by hereditary titles, or particular privileges and indulgences, annexed solely to birth. The Tartars seem to be the only people who have some faint shadow of this institution, in the race of their Mirzas. We meet with nothing, either in Turkey, Persia, the Indies, or China, that bears any similitude to that body of nobility which forms an essential part of every

European monarchy. We must go as far as Malabar to meet with any likeness to this sort of constitution; and there again it is very different, and consists in a tribe wholly dedicated to bearing arms, and which never intermixes, by marriage or otherwise, with any of the other tribes or castes, and will not even condescend to hold any commerce with them.

The greatest differences between us and the Orientals is in the manner of treating our women. No female ever reigned in the East, unless that princess of Mingrelia, whom Sir John Chardin tells us of in his voyages, and whom he accuses of robbing him. In France, though the women cannot wear the crown, they may be regents of the kingdom, and have a right to every other throne but that of the empire and Poland.

Another difference in our manner of treating women is the custom of placing about their persons men deprived of their virility, a custom which has always prevailed in Asia and Africa, and has at times been introduced into Europe by the Roman emperors. At present there are not throughout all Christendom two hundred eunuchs employed, either in our churches or theaters, whereas all the Eastern seraglios swarm with them.

In short, we differ in every respect, in religion, policy, government, manners, food, clothing, and even in our manner of writing, expressing, and thinking. That in which we most resemble them is that propensity to war, slaughter, and destruction, which has always depopulated the face of the earth. It must be owned, however, that this rage has taken much less possession of the minds of the people of India and China than of ours. In particular, we have no instance of the Indians or Chinese having made war upon the inhabitants of the North. In this respect they are much better members of society than ourselves; but then, on the other hand, this very virtue, or rather meekness, of theirs has been their ruin; for they have been all enslaved.

In the midst of the ravages and desolations which we have observed during the space of nine hundred years, we perceive a, love for order which secretly animates humankind, and has prevented its total ruin. This is one of the springs of nature which always recovers its tone; it is this which has formed the code of all nations, and this inspires a veneration for the laws and the ministers of the laws at Tonkin, and in the island of Formosa, the same as at Rome. Children respect their parents in all countries, and in every country—let others say what they will—the son is his father's heir; for, though in Turkey the son of a Timariot does not inherit his father's dignity, nor, in India, the son of an Omra his lands, the reason is because neither the one nor the other belong to the father himself. A place for life is, in no country of the world, considered as an inheritance; but in Persia, in India, and throughout all Asia, every native, and even every stranger, of whatsoever religion, except in Japan, may purchase lands that are not part of the crown demesnes, and leave them to his family.

In Europe there are still some nations where the law will not suffer a stranger to purchase a field or a burying-place in their territories. The barbarous right of

aubaine, by which a stranger beholds his father's estate go to the king's treasury, still exists in all the Christian states, unless where it is otherwise provided by private convention.

We likewise have a notion that in the Eastern countries the women are all slaves, because they are confined to the duties of domestic life. If they were really slaves, they must become beggars at the death of their husbands, which is not the case; the law everywhere provides a stated portion for them, and this portion they obtain in case of a divorce. In every part of the world, we find laws established for the support of families.

In all nations there is a proper curb to arbitrary power, either by law, custom, or manners. The Turkish sultan can neither touch the public treasure, break the janissaries, nor interfere with the inside of the seraglios of any of his subjects. The emperor of China cannot publish a single edict without the sanction of a tribunal. Every state is at times liable to violent oppressions; the grand viziers and the itimadoulets exercise rapine and murder, it is true, but they are no more authorized so to do by the laws than the wild Arabs or wandering Tartars are to plunder the caravans.

Religion teaches the same principles of morality to all nations, without exception; the ceremonies of the Asiatics are ridiculous, their belief absurd, but their precepts are just; the dervish, the fakir, the bonze, and the talapoin, are always crying out: "Be just and beneficent." The common people in China are accused of being great cheats in trade; they are perhaps encouraged to this vice by knowing that they can procure absolution for their crime of their bonzes for a trifling sum of money. The moral precepts taught them are good, the indulgence which is sold them is bad.

We are not to credit those travelers and missionaries, who have represented the Eastern priests to us as persons who preach up iniquity; this is traducing human nature; it is not possible that there should ever exist a religious society instituted for the encouragement or propagation of vice.

We should equally deceive ourselves, were we to believe that the Mohammedan religion owes its establishment wholly to the sword. The Mohammedans have had their missionaries in the Indies and in China; and the sects of Omar and Ali dispute with each other for proselytes, even on the coasts of Coromandel and Malabar.

From all that we have observed in this sketch of universal history, it follows that whatever concerns human nature is the same from one end of the universe to the other, and that what is dependent upon custom differs, or, if there is any resemblance, it is the effect of chance. The dominion of custom is much more extensive than that of nature, and influences all manners and all usages. It diffuses variety over the face of the universe. Nature establishes unity, and everywhere settles a few invariable principles; the soil is still the same, but culture produces various fruits.

As nature has placed in the heart of man interest, pride, and all the passions, it is no wonder that, during a period of about six centuries we meet with almost a continual succession of crimes and disasters. If we go back to earlier ages, we shall find them no better. Custom has ordered it so that evil has everywhere operated in a different manner.

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TO JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

Les Délices, August 30, 1755.

I have received, sir, your new book against the human species, and I thank you for it. You will please people by your manner of telling them the truth about themselves, but you will not alter them. The horrors of that human society—from which in our feebleness and ignorance we expect so many consolations—have never been painted in more striking colors: no one has ever been so witty as you are in trying to turn us into brutes: to read your book makes one long to go on all fours. Since, however, it is now some sixty years since I gave up the practice, I feel that it is unfortunately impossible for me to resume it: I leave this natural habit to those more fit for it than are you and I. Nor can I set sail to discover the aborigines of Canada, in the first place because my ill health ties me to the side of the greatest doctor in Europe, and I should not find the same professional assistance among the Missouris: and secondly because war is going on in that country, and the example of the civilized nations has made the barbarians almost as wicked as we are ourselves. I must confine myself to being a peaceful savage in the retreat I have chosen—close to your country, where you yourself should be.

I agree with you that science and literature have sometimes done a great deal of harm. Tasso's enemies made his life a long series of misfortunes: Galileo's enemies kept him languishing in prison, at seventy years of age, for the crime of understanding the revolution of the earth: and, what is still more shameful, obliged him to forswear his discovery. Since your friends began the Encyclopedia, their rivals attack them as deists, atheists—even Jansenists.

If I might venture to include myself among those whose works have brought them persecution as their sole recompense, I could tell you of men set on ruining me from the day I produced my tragedy *Oedipe:* of a perfect library of absurd calumnies which have been written against me: of an ex-Jesuit priest whom I saved from utter disgrace rewarding me by defamatory libels: of a man yet more contemptible printing my Century of Louis *XIV* with Notes in which crass ignorance gave birth to the most abominable falsehoods: of yet another, who sold to a publisher some chapters of a Universal History supposed to be by me: of the publisher avaricious enough to print this shapeless mass of blunders, wrong dates, mutilated facts and names: and, finally, of men sufficiently base and craven to

assign the production of this farago to me. I could show you all society poisoned by this class of person—a class unknown to the ancients—who, not being able to find any honest occupation—be it manual labor or service—and unluckily knowing how to read and write, become the brokers of literature, live on our works, steal our manuscripts, falsify them, and sell them. I could tell of some loose sheets of a gay trifle which I wrote thirty years ago (on the same subject that Chapelain was stupid enough to treat seriously) which are in circulation now through the breach of faith and the cupidity of those who added their own grossness to my *badinage* and filled in the gaps with a dullness only equalled by their malice; and who, finally, after twenty years, are selling everywhere a manuscript which, in very truth, is theirs and worthy of them only.

I may add, last of all, that someone has stolen part of the material I amassed in the public archives to use in my History of the War of 1741 when I was historiographer of France; that he sold that result of my labors to a bookseller in Paris; and is as set on getting hold of my property as if I were dead and he could turn it into money by putting it up to auction. I could show you ingratitude, imposture, and rapine pursuing me for forty years to the foot of the Alps and the brink of the grave. But what conclusion ought I to draw from all these misfortunes? This only: that I have no right to complain: Pope, Descartes, Bayle, Camöens—a hundred others—have been subjected to the same, or greater, injustice: and my destiny is that of nearly everyone who has loved letters too well.

Confess, sir, that all these things are, after all, but little personal pinpricks, which society scarcely notices. What matter to humankind that a few drones steal the honey of a few bees? Literary men make a great fuss of their petty quarrels: the rest of the world ignores them, or laughs at them.

They are, perhaps, the least serious of all the ills attendant on human life. The thorns inseparable from literature and a modest degree of fame are flowers in comparison with the other evils which from all time have, flooded the world. Neither Cicero, Varron, Lucretius, Virgil, or Horace had any part in the proscriptions of Marius, Scylla, that profligate An-tony, or that fool Lepidus; while as for that cowardly tyrant, Octavius Caesar—servilely entitled Augustus—he only became an assassin when he was deprived of the society of men of letters.

Confess that Italy owed none of her troubles to Petrarch or to Boccaccio: that Marot's jests were not responsible for the massacre of St. Bartholomew: or that tragedy of the *Cid* for the wars of the Fronde. Great crimes are always committed by great ignoramuses. What makes, and will always make, this world a vale of tears is the insatiable greediness and the indomitable pride of men, from Thomas Koulikan, who did not know how to read, to a customhouse officer who can just count. Letters support, refine, and comfort the soul: they are serving you, sir, at the very moment you decry them: you are like Achilles declaiming against fame, and Father Malebranche using his brilliant imagination to belittle imagination.

If anyone has a right to complain of letters, I am that person, for in all times and in all places they have led to my being persecuted: still, we must needs love them in spite of the way they are abused—as we cling to society, though the wicked spoil its pleasantness: as we must love our country, though it treats us unjustly: and as we must love and serve the Supreme Being, despite the superstition and fanaticism which too often dishonor His service.

M. Chappus tells me your health is very unsatisfactory: you must come and recover here in your native place, enjoy its freedom, drink (with me) the milk of its cows, and browse on its grass.

I am yours most philosophically and with sincere esteem.