

Political Essays

François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire

In these four short essays, which form part of Voltaire's Philosophical Dictionary of 1750, one sees the wit, iconoclasm, and social realism of this great philosophe.

DEMOCRACY

As a rule there is no comparison between the crimes of great men, who are always ambitious, and the crimes of the people, who always want, and can only want, liberty and equality. These two sentiments, Liberty and Equality, do not lead straight to calumny, rapine, assassination, poisoning, the devastation of one's neighbors' lands, etc. But ambitious might and the mania for power plunge men into all these crimes, whatever the time, whatever the place.

Popular government is in itself, therefore, less iniquitous, less abominable than despotic power.

The great vice of democracy is certainly not tyranny and cruelty. There have been mountain-dwelling republicans who were savage and ferocious; but it was not the republican spirit that made them so, it was nature.

The real vice of a civilized republic is expressed in the Turkish fable of the dragon with many heads and the dragon with many tails. The many heads injured one another, and the many tails obeyed a single head which sought to devour everything.

Democracy seems suitable only to a very little country, and one that is happily situated. However small it may be, it will make many mistakes, because it will be composed of men. Discord will reign there as in a monastery; but there will be no St. Bartholomew, no Irish massacres, no Sicilian vespers, no Inquisition, no condemnation to the galleys for having taken some water from the sea without paying for it—unless one assumes that this republic is composed of devils in a corner of hell.

Which is better—runs the endless question—a republic or a monarchy? The dispute always resolves itself into an agreement that it is a very difficult business to govern men. The Jews had God Himself for their master, and see what has happened to them as a result: nearly always have they been oppressed and enslaved and even today they do not appear to cut a very pretty figure.

EQUALITY

It is clear that men, in the enjoyment of their natural faculties, are equal: they are equal when they perform animal functions, and when they exercise their understanding. The King of China, the Great Mogul, the Padisha of Turkey, cannot say to the least of men: "I forbid you to digest, to go to the privy, or to think." All the animals of each species are equal among themselves. Animals, by nature, have over us the advantage of independence. If a bull which is wooing a heifer is driven away with the blows of the horns by a stronger bull, it goes in search of another mistress in another field, and lives free. A cock, beaten by a cock, consoles itself in another poultry house. It is not so with us. A little vizier exiles a bostangi to Lemnos: the vizier Azem exiles the little vizier to Tenedos: the padisha exiles the vizier Azem to Rhodes: the Janissaries put the padisha in prison, and elect another who will exile good Mussulmans as he chooses; people will still be very obliged to him if he limits his sacred authority to this small exercise.

If this world were what it seems it should be, if man could find everywhere in it an easy subsistence, and a climate suitable to his nature, it is clear that it would be impossible for one man to enslave another. If this globe were covered with wholesome fruits; if the air, which should contribute to our life, gave us no diseases and no premature deaths; if man had no need of lodging and bed other than those of the buck and the deer; then the Gengis Khans and the Tamerlanes would have no servants other than their children, who would be decent enough to help them in their old age.

In the natural state enjoyed by all untamed quadrupeds, birds, and reptiles, man would be as happy as they. Domination would then be a chimera, an absurdity of which no one would think; for why seek servants when you have no need of their service?

If it came into the head of some individual of tyrannous mind and brawny arm to enslave a neighbor less strong than he, the thing would be impossible; the oppressed would be on the Danube before the oppressor had taken his measures on the Volga.

All men then would be necessarily equal, if they were without needs. It is the poverty connected with our species which subordinates one man to another. It is not the inequality which is the real misfortune, it is the dependence. It matters very little that So-and-so calls himself "His Highness," and So-and-so "His Holiness"; but to serve the one or the other is hard.

A big family has cultivated fruitful soil; two little families nearby have thankless and rebellious fields; the two poor families have to serve the opulent family, or slaughter it. There is no difficulty in that. But one of the two indigent families offers its arms to the rich family in exchange for bread, while the other attacks and is defeated. The subservient family is the origin of the servants and the workmen; the beaten family is the origin of the slaves.

In our unhappy world it is impossible for men living in society not to be divided into two classes, the one the rich who command, the other the poor who serve; and these two classes are subdivided into a thousand, and these thousand still have different gradations.

When the lots are drawn you come to us and say: "I am a man like you. I have two hands and two feet, as much pride as you, nay more, a mind as disordered, at least, as inconsequent, as contradictory as yours. I am a citizen of San Marino, or of Ragusa, or Vaugirard: give me my share of the land. In our known hemisphere there are about fifty thousand million arpents to cultivate, some passable, some sterile. We are only about a thousand million featherless bipeds in this continent; that makes fifty arpents apiece: be just; give me my fifty arpents."

"Go and take them in the land of the Kaffirs," we answer, "or the Hottentots, or the Samoyedes; come to an amicable arrangement with them; here all the shares are taken. If you want to eat, be clothed, lodged, and warmed among us, work for us as your father did; serve us or amuse us, and you will be paid; otherwise you will be obliged to ask charity, which would be too degrading to your sublime nature, and would stop your being really the equal of kings, and even of country parsons, according to the pretensions of your noble pride."

II. All the poor are not unhappy. The majority were born in that state, and continual work keeps them from feeling their position too keenly; but when they do feel it, then one sees wars, like that of the popular party against the senate party in Rome, like those of the peasants in Germany, England, and France. All these wars finish sooner or later with the subjection of the people, because the powerful have money, and money is master of everything in a state. I say in a state, for it is not the same between nations. The nation which makes the best use of the sword will always subjugate the nation which has more gold and less courage.

All men are born with a sufficiently violent liking for domination, wealth, and pleasure, and with a strong taste for idleness; consequently, all men covet the money, the wives, or the daughters of other men; they wish to be their master, to subject them to all their caprices, and to do nothing, or at least to do only very agreeable things. You see clearly that with these fine inclinations it is as impossible for men to be equal as it is impossible for two preachers or two professors of theology not to be jealous of each other.

The human race, such as it is, cannot subsist unless there is an infinity of useful men who possess nothing at all; for it is certain that a man who is well off will not leave his own land to come to till yours, and if you have need of a pair of shoes, it is not the Secretary to the Privy Council who will make them for you. Equality, therefore, is at once the most natural thing and the most fantastic.

As men go to excess in everything when they can, this inequality has been exaggerated. It has been maintained in many countries that it was not permissible for a citizen to leave the country where chance has caused him to be born. The sense of this law is obviously: "This land is so bad and so badly governed, that

we forbid any individual to leave it, for fear that everyone will leave it.” Do better: make all your subjects wish to live in your country, and foreigners wish to come to it.

All men have the right in the bottom of their hearts to think themselves entirely equal to other men. It does not follow from this that the cardinal’s cook should order his master to prepare him his dinner, but the cook can say: “I am a man like my master; like him I was born crying; like me he will die with the same pangs and the same ceremonies. Both of us perform the same animal functions. If the Turks take possession of Rome, and if then I am cardinal and my master cook, I shall take him into my service.” This discourse is reasonable and just, but while waiting for the Great Turk to take possession of Rome, the cook must do his duty, or else all human society is disordered.

As regards a man who is neither a cardinal’s cook, nor endowed with any other employment in the state; as regards a private person who is connected with nothing, but who is vexed at being received everywhere with an air of being patronized or scorned, who sees quite clearly that many monseigneurs have no more knowledge, wit, or virtue than he, and who at times is bored at waiting in their antechambers, what should he decide to do? Why, to take himself off.

FATHERLAND

A young journeyman pastrycook who had been to college, and who still knew a few of Cicero’s phrases, boasted one day of loving his fatherland. “What do you mean by your fatherland?” a neighbor asked him. “Is it your oven? Is it the village where you were born and which you have never seen since? Is it the street in which dwelt your father and mother, who have been ruined with the result that you are reduced to baking little pies for a living? Is it the town hall where you will never be the police superintendent’s clerk? Is it the church of Our Lady where you have not been able to become a choirboy, while a stupid man is archbishop and duke with an income of twenty thousand golden louis?”

The journeyman pastrycook did not know what to answer. A philosopher, who was listening to this conversation, concluded that in a fatherland of any extent there must often be several million men who have no fatherland.

You, pleasure-loving Parisians, who have never traveled farther than Dieppe to eat fresh fish; who know nothing but your brilliant town house, your pretty country house, and your box at an Opera where the rest of Europe persists in being bored; who speak your own language well enough because you know no other—you love all these things, and you love the girls you keep, the champagne which comes to you from Reims, the dividends which the Hotel-de-Ville pays you every six months; and you say you love your fatherland!

Now, in all conscience, does a financier sincerely love his fatherland?

The officer and the soldier who pillage their winter quarters, if one lets them—have

they a very warm love for the peasants they ruin?

Where was the fatherland of the scarred Duc de Guise, was it in Nancy, Paris, Madrid, Rome? What fatherland have you, Cardinals de La Balue, Duprat, Lorraine, Mazarin? Where was the fatherland of Attila, and of a hundred other heroes of his type? I would like someone to tell me which was Abraham's fatherland.

The first man to write that one's fatherland is wherever one feels comfortable was, I believe, Euripides in his *Phaeton*. But the first man who left his birthplace to seek his comfort elsewhere had said it before him.

What, then, is a fatherland? Is it not a good field, whose owner, lodged in a well-kept house, can say: "This field that I till, this house that I have built, are mine. I live here protected by laws which no tyrant can infringe. When those who own fields and houses, like myself, meet in their common interest, I have my voice in the assembly; I am a part of everything, a part of the community, a part of the dominion—there is my fatherland?"

Very well. But is it better for your fatherland to be a monarchy or a republic? For four thousand years has this question been debated. Ask the rich for an answer, they all prefer aristocracy; question the people, they want democracy: only kings prefer royalty. How then is it that nearly the whole world is governed by monarchs? Ask the rats who proposed to hang a bell round the cat's neck. But in truth, the real reason is, as has been said, that men are very rarely worthy of governing themselves.

It is sad that in order to be a good patriot one often has to be the enemy of the rest of mankind. Whenever old Cato, that excellent citizen, spoke before the Roman senate, he always used to say: "Such is my opinion, and Carthage must be destroyed." To be a good patriot is to wish that one's city may be enriched by trade, and be powerful by arms. It is clear that one country cannot gain without another's losing, and that one cannot conquer without bringing misery to another. Such then is the human state, that to wish greatness for one's country is to wish harm to one's neighbors. He who wished that his fatherland might never be greater, smaller, richer, or poorer, would be a citizen of the world.

LIBERTY OF THE PRESS

What harm can the prediction of Jean-Jacques do to Russia? None. He is free to explain it in a mystical, typical, allegorical sense, according to custom. The nations which will destroy the Russians will be bellesletters, mathematics, wit, and social graces, which degrade man and pervert nature.

From five to six thousand pamphlets have been printed in Holland against Louis XIV, none of which helped to make him lose the battles of Blenheim, Turin, and Ramillies.

In general, we have as natural a right to make use of our pens as of our tongue, at our peril, risk, and hazard. I know many books which have bored their readers, but I know of none which has done real evil. Theologians, or pretended politicians, cry: "Religion is destroyed, the government is lost, if you print certain truths or certain paradoxes. Never dare to think, till you have asked permission from a monk or a clerk. It is against the public welfare for a man to think for himself. Homer, Plato, Cicero, Virgil, Pliny, Horace, never published anything but with the approbation of the doctors of the Sorbonne and of the holy Inquisition.

"See into what horrible decadence the liberty of the press has brought England and Holland. It is true that they possess the commerce of the whole world, and that England is victorious on sea and land; but it is merely a false greatness, a false opulence: they are hastening to their ruin. An enlightened people cannot exist."

No one could reason more justly, my friends; but let us see, if you please, what state has been ruined by a book. The most dangerous, the most pernicious book of all, is that of Spinoza. Not only in the character of a Jew does he attack the New Testament, but in the character of a scholar he ruins the Old. His system of atheism is a thousand times better constructed and reasoned than those of Straton and of Epicurus. It requires the most profound sagacity to answer to the arguments by which he endeavors to prove that one substance cannot form another.

Like yourself, I detest this book, which I perhaps understand better than you, and to which you have replied very badly. But have you discovered that it has changed the face of the world? Has any preacher lost a florin of his income by the publication of the works of Spinoza? Is there a bishop whose rents have diminished? On the contrary, their revenues have doubled since his time: all the ill is limited to a small number of peaceable readers, who have examined Spinoza's arguments in their studies, and who have written for or against them in works that are little known.

For ourselves, you have hardly been consistent in having printed, *ad usum Delphini*, the atheism of Lucretius—as you have already been reproached with doing. No trouble, no scandal, has ensued from it; so Spinoza might be left to live in peace in Holland, as was Lucretius in Rome.

But if there appears among you any new book, the ideas of which shock your own—supposing you have any—or of which the author may be of a party contrary to yours—or what is worse, of which the author may not be of any party at all—then you cry out "Fire!" and all is noise, scandal, and uproar in your small corner of the earth. There is an abominable man who has declared in print that if we had no hands we would not be able to make shoes nor stockings. The devout cry out, furred doctors assemble, alarms multiply from college to college, from house to house, whole communities are disturbed. And why? For five or six pages, about which no one will give a fig at the end of three months. Does a

book displease you? Refute it. Does it bore you? Don't read it.

Oh! you say to me, the books of Luther and Calvin have destroyed the Roman Catholic religion in one-half of Europe? Why not say also, that the books of the patriarch Photius have destroyed this Roman religion in Asia, Africa, Greece, and Russia?

You deceive yourself grossly, when you think that you have been ruined by books. The empire of Russia is two thousand leagues in extent, and there are not six men who are aware of the points disputed by the Greek and Latin Church. If the monk Luther, John Calvin, and the vicar Zwingli had been content with writing, Rome would still hold in subjugation all the states that it has lost; but these people and their adherents ran from town to town, from house to house, exciting the women, and they were supported by princes. The fury which tormented Amata and which, according to Virgil, whipped her like a top, was not more turbulent. Be assured that one enthusiastic, factious, ignorant, supple, vehement Capuchin—the emissary of some ambitious monks—who goes about preaching, confessing, communicating, and caballing, will much sooner overthrow a province than a hundred authors can enlighten it. It was not the Koran which made Mohammed succeed: it was Mohammed who caused the success of the Koran.

No! Rome has not been vanquished by books. It has been vanquished because it revolted Europe by its rapacity, by the public sale of indulgences, by insulting men and wishing to govern them like domestic animals, for having abused its power to such an extent that it is astonishing a single village remains to it. Henry VIII, Elizabeth, the duke of Saxony, the landgrave of Hesse, the princes of Orange, the Condés and Colignys, have done all, and books nothing. Trumpets have never gained battles, nor caused any walls to fall except those of Jericho.

You fear books, as certain small cantons fear violins. Let men read, and let men dance—these two amusements will never do any harm to the world.