

剑桥政治思想史原著系列（影印本）

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

# 伏尔泰政治著作选

Voltaire

Political

Writings

Edited by

DAVID

WILLIAMS

中国政法大学出版社

VOLTAIRE

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*Political Writings*

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY

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CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE  
HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT



VOLTAIRE  
*Political Writings*

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE  
HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

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## Abbreviations

- Best. D *Voltaire: correspondence and related documents*, ed. Theodore Besterman, in *The complete works of Voltaire* (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire and Banbury/Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1968–77)
- Kehl *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Condorcet *et al.*, (Kehl, 1784–9)
- Moland *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Louis Moland (Paris: Garnier, 1877–85)

### Works by Voltaire (with date of first publication)

- CLDP *Commentaire sur le livre des délits et des peines par un avocat de province. Commentary on the book On crimes and punishments, by a provincial lawyer* 1766
- ABC *L'A B C, ou Dialogues entre A B C; traduits de l'anglais de m. Huet. The A B C, or Dialogues between A B C, translated from the English by Mr Huet* 1768
- DH *Les droits des hommes et les usurpations des autres. Traduit de l'italien. The rights of men and the usurpations of others. Translated from the Italian* 1768
- DP *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif. Pocket philosophical dictionary* 1764
- E(DP) *Etats, gouvernements. States, governments*
- G(DP) *Guerre. War*
- L(DP) *Lois (Des). Laws*
- P(DP) *Patrie. Homeland*

*List of abbreviations*

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DPC	<i>Dialogue entre un philosophe et un contrôleur général des finances. Dialogue between a philosopher and a comptroller-general of finance</i> 1750
IR	<i>Idées républicaines par un membre d'un corps. Republican ideas by a member of a public body</i> 1765
LHQE	<i>L'Homme aux quarante écus. The man in the street</i> 1768
PA	<i>Pensées sur l'administration publique. Thoughts on public administration</i> 1752
QE	<i>Questions sur l'Encyclopédie. Questions on the Encyclopaedia</i> 1770-2
D(QE)	<i>Démocratie. Democracy</i> 1771
E(QE)	<i>Economie. Economy</i> 1771
G(QE)	<i>Gouvernement. Government</i> 1771-4
H(QE)	<i>Homme. Man</i> 1771
I(QE)	<i>Impôt. Tax</i> 1771-4
P(QE)	<i>Politique. Politics</i> 1774

## Chronology

- 1694 François-Marie Arouet baptised at the church of Saint André-des-arts in Paris on 22 November. Exact date of birth unknown.
- 1704–11 Educated at the Jesuit college of Louis-le-grand.
- 1713 Secretary to the French ambassador at The Hague.
- 1717 May. Imprisoned in the Bastille for a scurrilous satire.
- 1718 Reputation as a dramatist established with the successful performance of his tragedy, *Oedipus*. Now signing himself 'Arouet de Voltaire' (Best. D72).
- 1726 Quarrels with the chevalier de Rohan-Chabot, who has Voltaire thrashed by his lackeys. Unable to seek redress against this nobleman, he is exiled from Paris. In May goes to England, where he stays until 1728.
- 1734 Publication of the *Philosophical letters*, the 'first bomb to be launched against the *ancien régime*', according to Gustave Lanson. It was condemned by the Paris *parlement*. Flees to Cirey where he stays with Madame Du Châtelet for the most of the next decade, working on his translation of Newton.
- 1736 Starts corresponding with the Royal Prince of Prussia, Frederick.
- 1740 Publishes Frederick II's *Anti-Machiavelli*.
- 1743 Goes to Berlin on a secret mission in connection with negotiations to end the War of the Austrian Succession.
- 1745 Appointed Royal Historiographer to Louis XV.
- 1746 Elected to the French Academy.



## Chronology

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- 1747 The first of his satirical tales, *Zadig*, is published. In November loses his favoured position at the French court, and flees to the court of Stanislas at Nancy. Leaves Alsace after the death of Madame Du Châtelet in 1750, and accepts invitation to Frederick the Great's court at Potsdam.
- 1750 Publication of *The Voice of the wise man and of the people*. Condemned by the Church and placed on the Catholic Index of Forbidden Books.
- 1751 Publication of first edition of *The Age of Louis XIV*, and *DPC*.
- 1752 Publication of first edition of *PA*.
- 1753 Breaks with Frederick. An unhappy period of rootlessness follows.
- 1754–55 Settles at Les Délices in Geneva.
- 1756 Publication of the *Essay on the customs and the spirit of nations*.
- 1757 Acts as diplomatic intermediary in secret negotiations between France and Prussia after the outbreak of the Seven Years War in 1756.
- 1759 Publication of *Candide* and the *History of Russia under Peter the Great*. Moves to Ferney on the Franco-Swiss border where he remains until his return to Paris in the last weeks of his life.
- 1762 The Calas affair starts. This is the first of the great public causes in which Voltaire challenges the power of the State in the defence of the individual's rights to justice, and which were to inform most of his polemical writings from now on. Jean Calas was broken on the wheel by order of the Toulouse *parlement* in 1762. Also involved in the campaign to rehabilitate Sirven, falsely accused of the murder of his daughter by the Bishop of Castres.
- 1763 Publication of the *Treatise on tolerance*.
- 1764 Publication of the first edition of *DP*.
- 1766 La Barre convicted at Abbeville. Tortured and executed in July. Two weeks later dedicates his *Account of the death of the chevalier de La Barre* to Beccaria. Publication of *CLDP*.
- 1768 Publication of *LHQE*, *ABC*, *DH* and *IR*. By now heavily involved in Genevan political quarrels.

## Chronology

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- 1771 Publication of *QE* starts.  
1777 Publication of the *Commentary on the Spirit of the laws*.  
1778 Returns to Paris. Dies in Paris on 30 May.  
1791 11 July: state burial in the Panthéon.

## Introduction

In politics as in philosophy, Voltaire was no system-builder. He had a deep suspicion of 'systems', and his political writings do not combine readily to reflect a systematically argued world-view. 'I write to act', he once informed Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Best. D13221), and as a political thinker he tended to respond to events rather than metaphysical abstractions. He was remarkably well-informed, however, and his reading was wide. He knew the work of Grotius, Pufendorf, Hume, Bolingbroke, Montesquieu, Machiavelli, d'Argenson, Mably, Saint-Pierre, Quesnay, Le Mercier, Melon, Hobbes, Mandeville, Buffon, Beccaria, Rousseau and Locke although, astonishingly, evidence suggests he knew little of the latter's *Two treatises on government* (see Perkins 1965, Appendix 2, Crocker 1983, Thielemann 1959, Kotta 1966).

He drew constantly on this rich hinterland, but his allusions are deceptively casual, and often expressed in an ironic, tangential way. As he puts it in *ABC*, 'we take what we like from Aristotle to Locke, and don't give a damn for the rest'. Only with Montesquieu, and to a lesser extent Rousseau, does he offer anything like a prolonged commentary on another theorist, even when we are led to expect one, as in the case of Beccaria. Voltaire's technique is to entertain, to provoke and to inform by means of satirical anecdote, outrageous vulgarisation and lively dialogue. Among his many gifts as a persuasive polemicist is his unrivalled ability to breathe life and a sense of human reality into the driest issue. Voltaire was a politically engaged propagandist. He wrote to exert pressure for change, and he possessed the rare gift of distilling from small events those vast implica-

tions for political life whose urgent complexities continue to overwhelm us.

### Power and the state

Almost certainly the most powerfully formative experience behind the evolution of Voltaire's views on the legitimacy and exercise of power was his brief stay in England between May 1726 and November 1728 (see Pomeau 1985, ch. 13; Fletcher 1986 ch. 2; Perry 1977). The post-1688 settlement that gave England constitutional monarchy offered Voltaire a working model of government. England was to become a repeated point of reference in his political writings, and it is no accident that one of the interlocutors in *ABC* is an Englishman. Voltaire never envisaged the possibility of simply engineering a transfer of the English model to France. There was no House of Commons in France, no possibility of a 1688-style revolution, no freedom of speech or of the press, no equality before the law. In any case, Voltaire was never an advocate of revolution. The upheavals of 1789 would have appalled him, the power of the mob terrifying him as much, if not more, than that of autocrats. He remained very much opposed to any idea of devolving power to the masses, as can be seen in his repeated opposition to Montesquieu's famous antithesis between republics and monarchies. He wrote in sympathetic but very general terms about republics, but only one example of a personal commitment to 'republican philosophy' has been found, and this is in a letter written to his friend Thieriot in 1726 while he was in England (Best. D303). It stands alone (Besterman 1969, ch. 24; but see Gay 1988 for the counterview).

More typical are the views expressed by C in *ABC*: 'The people are not fit to govern. I could not bear my wig-maker to be a legislator. I would prefer never to wear a wig.' In France Voltaire saw clearly that the practical alternative lay between power exercised by a monarch, or power exercised by the *parlements*. The Paris *parlement*, which was really a court of law, was nothing like the English parliament, and Voltaire's opposition to any further transfer of power to it, or to the provincial *parlements*, was unremitting and unreserved (see Tate 1972). He thought all the *parlements* were dangerous to progress and liberty, and that their record as repositories of justice, and as courts of appeal, was abysmal. It might seem paradoxical at first glance, but Voltaire was sure that the only viable system of government for

France was that of an absolute monarchy (see Gay 1988 ch. 7). This much debated *thèse royale* is explored in *PA*, as well as in *ABC*. Voltaire was never at ease personally with monarchs or with their courts, but he maintained firmly and consistently that absolutism did not necessarily mean tyranny. He saw concrete advantages accruing to a state ruled by a supreme monarch, provided that this power was tempered by wisdom, tolerance and, above all, the law.

Voltaire thus made a crucial distinction between absolute and arbitrary power, the absolutism of the monarch being legitimised not through divine right but through his ready submission to the rule of law. The absolute monarch must be enlightened and must act within the confines of reason and justice, in other words, be a 'philosopher-king' – a prospect that Voltaire hoped at one stage would materialise in the person of Frederick the Great (see Besterman 1965; Fleischaer 1958).

Despite its bland, unpromising title, *ABC* is one of the most revealing and radical works about power and the State that Voltaire wrote. It was first published towards the end of 1768 at one of the most politically active periods in Voltaire's life and was immediately disowned. It was placed on the Index in 1776. The first edition (with only sixteen conversations) was printed under the title *The A B C. A curious dialogue, translated from the English by Mr Huet*, and Voltaire made great efforts to attribute the work to Mr Huet's mysterious Englishman. It now consists of seventeen conversations between three characters, the boldest and most loquacious being A, an Englishman. B might well be Voltaire himself, and C is a Dutchman.

The conversations focus on subjects that could certainly not be discussed openly in France in a critical way, namely politics, morality and theology; the work was, as he put it in a letter to Mme Du Deffand in 1768, 'an English roast beef, very difficult to digest for the many small stomachs at Paris' (Best. D15387). The first conversation is about the respective merits of Hobbes, Grotius and Montesquieu, and it is soon clear that Montesquieu is the real object of Voltaire's analysis. Much of this conversation is in fact a commentary on Montesquieu's *Spirit of the laws*, about which Voltaire had mixed feelings, despite his view, expressed through B, that the book should be ranked among 'works of genius'.

Voltaire also crosses swords, though not very convincingly, with Hobbes, a 'sad philosopher' with a grim view of human nature, but with the ring of unpalatable truth behind his uncompromising

attitudes. Voltaire's objections to Hobbes are emotional rather than intellectual; he found Hobbes uncomfortable rather than wrong (see Thielmann 1959). He has little of substance to say about Grotius here, except to remark that he was a pedant whose compilations have not merited the praise bestowed on them by the ignorant. In conversation 4, Voltaire resumes battle with his old enemy Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose views on property, man in the state of nature, natural law and natural equality, as expressed in the *Discourse on the origin of inequality among men* (1754) and the *Social contract* (1762), are also attacked in *IR* and other texts.

Conversations 5–9 and 14 range interestingly and provocatively over subjects with a direct bearing on power, the State, and the human implications of the relationship between the two. They also illuminate Voltaire's use of anecdotal skills in the advancement of arguments about freedom, the lessons of ancient history in the consideration of the best forms of government, the political advances of modern Europe, and particularly England, serfdom, and the enslavement of the mind.

Some of the views on power and the State in *ABC* had been voiced in a much earlier, though more circumspect, work with a more open title. *PA* was written in Paris in 1750, published in 1752, and judiciously hidden away in a collective edition of Voltaire's works. In 1750 Voltaire had written a pamphlet called *The voice of the wise man and of the people*, in which, among other things, he had attacked the inequities of the tax system, and in particular the continuing exemption of the Church, which still owned between a quarter and a fifth of the nation's wealth and about 6 per cent of the land (Lough 1960). The pamphlet had caused a furore, and was placed on the Index. On 21 May 1751 it was officially condemned by the government. It was during the composition of this pamphlet that Voltaire started to list his reflections on government and the exercise of power generally. In preparing this work for re-publication in 1756, he cut seven sections, and added nine. Thirteen sections from *The voice of the wise man and of the people* were reprinted as part of the *PA*, although this material was to be deleted later in Kehl. These have been restored, as has the pre-1756 text that Voltaire had himself excised in later editions. Moland printed this work under the title that Voltaire used in the first edition, *Thoughts on government*.

In *PA* Voltaire set out his basic position on freedom: 'Freedom consists in being dependent only on the law.' This definition enabled

him to identify those states and city-states in Europe that enjoyed true freedom (e.g. Sweden, Holland, England, Geneva, Hamburg) and those that did not (discreet silence on France, other than a general reference to large Christian countries). Only with the possession of freedom, so defined, could the true significance of what it was to be human emerge. It followed that the best form of government was the one that guaranteed equal protection for all ranks of citizens before the law. France's situation in this context is introduced with a piece of verse by Conyers Middleton, and this leads to a series of reflections on the French monarchy, and the benefits of absolutism *under the law*: 'A king who is not contradicted can hardly be wicked', while conversely a king who does not enjoy absolute power is compelled to assert himself. Thus it is that when Louis XV declared to the Paris *parlement* on 3 March 1766 that he was the sole source of power in the State, causing much public consternation, Voltaire approved strongly of the King's statement (Best. D12331-D12334; Besterman 1965; Perkins 1989 section 3).

There is a hard-nosed pragmatism about Voltaire's thinking on politics, and many of the articles in *DP* offer good examples of this. According to one of Voltaire's secretaries, Collini, the idea for *DP* was born at a supper party hosted by Frederick the Great at Potsdam on 28 September 1752 (see Todd 1980), but Voltaire did not start serious work on the articles for his 'pocket philosophical dictionary' until well after 1760. By this time Diderot's great *Encyclopaedia*, from which Voltaire drew inspiration for his own alphabetical project, had fallen foul of officialdom. The first edition of *DP* appeared in July 1764. It was reissued in 1765 and in 1767, with changes, and again in 1769, after which its history becomes a little confused. The 1769 *DP*, containing 118 articles, was merged with *ABC*, and published under the title *Reason through the alphabet*. Forty-eight of the articles were then combined, expanded and revised in the context of *QE*. This latter work was conceived as a supplement to Diderot's *Encyclopaedia*, and Voltaire assembled no less than 423 articles for it. After his death, the Kehl editors further muddied the waters by adding material from other writings to produce a vast, composite seven-volume work also entitled the *Philosophical dictionary*. The original 1764 *DP* was thus absorbed to the point of invisibility in the first collective edition of Voltaire's works (see Todd 1980 ch. 1). Four texts in this collection are classified as part of *DP* (see Note on the translation).

*E(DP)* was possibly composed as early as 1757. It contains Voltaire's acid comments on the futility of political theory as an effective means of influencing those who actually wield power, together with comments on the fashion for publishing political 'wills' of five great men: Richelieu, Louvois, Charles V, Duke of Lorraine, Alberoni and Belle-Isle. To these he adds significantly, and not without irony, a sixth, the notorious brigand Louis Mandrin, who had been broken on the wheel in 1755. In so doing, he was reminding his reader of a point that he made frequently, namely that all political power sprang originally from the actions of robbers and the exercise of force. The difference between a Mandrin and a Richelieu was ultimately only the difference between a winner and a loser. The point is illustrated again in *G(QE)*.

The first six sections of *G(QE)* were published in 1771 in the sixth part of *QE*, and the last section appeared in the seventh part in 1774. Section 6 contains a detailed commentary on the merits of the English constitution, and on the historical struggle that England endured over the centuries to achieve freedom under the law, and a state in which each citizen had those natural rights restored to him of which most men living under monarchical systems are deprived. England again shines as a beacon of hope for the future.

*D(QE)* was first published in the fourth part of *QE* in 1771. In *L(DP)*, Voltaire had written that democracy was superior to all other systems of government, 'because there everyone is equal, and everyone works for the happiness of everyone else'. In *D(QE)* his views are more cautiously formulated. As many commentators have pointed out, Voltaire's views on democracy are at best ambivalent. His respect for the views, and certainly for the potential power, of ordinary people certainly increased in his later years, particularly after his experience of living with the *natifs* of Geneva (see Gay 1988, ch. 4). In *D(QE)* Voltaire's enthusiasm for the people's power is considerably less than his enthusiasm for their rights (see Birchall 1990). Liberty and equality are discussed largely in the context of Athenian history in which the definition of what constituted the 'people' is very specific and restrictive. Republics on Athenian lines certainly resulted in less crime and less injustice, and here Voltaire is thinking almost certainly of the merits of the Genevan Republic, but these considerable advantages are weighed against 'the real vice of a civilised republic', namely the tendency to anarchy and ultimately tyranny. Democracy



was at best suitable only for small countries, and even then its success could not be guaranteed, if only because it was operated by fallible human beings on whose qualities and talents it was entirely dependent.

Is a republic better than a monarchy? Voltaire's answer in *D(QE)* is tentative: government is a difficult matter; if the Jews could not succeed with God as their master, what hope is there for the rest of us! For Voltaire history proved conclusively that Montesquieu was wrong about virtue being the dynamic principle of republics. In real life republics have never come into being from acts of virtue, but from acts of ambition, whose motive is merely to alter the balance and source of power (but see Gay 1958).

Voltaire also examines the origins of political power and social organisation in *P(QE)* and in *H(QE)*. The former was published in 1774, and starts with speculation on the pre-social state of man in nature. The picture painted of natural man is very different from that of Rousseau's noble savage, endowed with qualities of natural virtue and happiness. The political aspiration of Voltaire's natural man was to 'equal the animals', that is, to become self-sufficient in the food, clothing and shelter afforded to animals by nature. The essence of primitive existence, and indeed the whole of man's story, is reduced to the pursuit of well-being and the acquisition of defences against omnipresent evil. The climb from the pit of brutality is long, arduous and uncertain, and Voltaire describes in bleak terms the decisive factors in the evolution of political life: the law of kill or be killed; enslave or be enslaved; the alliance between religion and politics to legitimise those acts of brigandage that define the frontiers of modern states, and cement treaties of expediency between competing carnivores.

In the second part of this article Voltaire comes back to the issue of who should govern, the people or the King? In aristocracies power can be abused too easily, and revolutions are always to be feared. The egalitarianism of democracies is in principle 'natural and wise', but in practice such systems are rare and fragile. Voltaire leaves the final judgement on monarchy open as he looks to the future: monarchies fall because individual monarchs are unfit to govern. But it is the ruler who fails, not the system, and 'in ten or twelve centuries, when men are more enlightened', the system might work (see Rivière 1987).