

On Democracy

By Voltaire

ORDINARILY there is no comparison between the crimes of the great who are always ambitious, and the crimes of the people who always want, and can want only liberty and equality. These two sentiments, Liberty and Equality, do not lead direct to calumny, rapine, assassination, poisoning, the devastation of one's neighbours' lands, etc.; but ambitious might and the mania for power plunge into all these crimes whatever be the time, whatever be 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, savage, ferocious; but it is not the republican spirit that made them so, it is nature.

The real vice of a civilized republic is in the Turkish fable of the dragon with many heads and the dragon with many tails. The many heads hurt each other, and the many tails obey a single head which wants to devour everything.

Democracy seems suitable only to a very little country, and further it must be happily situated. Small though it 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 supposes this republic composed of devils in a corner of hell.

(edited)