



THINKER IN BOXES

FRANÇOIS-MARIE AROUET

Team: French Exiles

Position: Deep point

Status: Free agent

You've probably never heard of François-Marie Arouet (1694–1778), but then you've also probably never heard of his more famous pen name Voltaire either. I considered grousing about that and inserting a snipe or two about the shortcomings of an educational system that could leave you so ignorant and so on, but it seemed like such an obvious thing to do that I thought I'd just change things up a bit and say how wonderful it is that you don't know anything at all about Voltaire. My logic is simple. If you don't know anything about Voltaire, then I have to teach you about him, and that means job security. So hooray for a failing public school system.

Voltaire was French, but he was kicked out of France by the king, so he couldn't have been all bad. He was also a central figure in the development of modern liberalism. He was a playwright and poet who also wrote histories of questionable accuracy, and most important, he wrote philosophical treatises. He wrote vigorous arguments supporting freedoms of speech and religion and the right to a fair trial: ideas that would later become central elements of most democratic systems in the world.

He did not write specifically about democracy, and his less-than-kind opinion of the masses probably would have made him cringe at the idea of universal suffrage, but the liberalism he espoused is critical to modern democracy. It may even be the necessary element of democracy. A vote means nothing without the freedom to debate, the freedom to disagree, and the freedom to try to convince others to join you to express that disagreement in the vote. Thus, it's to Voltaire that we owe a significant debt for those and other elements of freedom and fairness that define a functioning democracy.