

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION¹

‘Long since convinced that the human race is infinitely perfectible, and that this process, a necessary consequence of the present state of knowledge and societies, can only be arrested by global physical setbacks, I viewed the task of hastening this progress as one of the most precious occupations, one of the first duties of one who has fortified his reason by study and reflection’ (O.C. I: 574). These words were written in July 1793 by the Marquis de Condorcet while in hiding under sentence of death from the Jacobin Terror, separated from his wife and small daughter, and engaged in preparing a grand work entitled *Tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain*, of which he intended the *Esquisse*, meaning ‘sketch’, here presented in translation, as a ‘prospectus.’ Of the projected work there are only fragments and notes (such as the definitions of ‘liberty’ and ‘revolutionary’ included here), for within months he was found dead in a country prison at the age of fifty.

Denounced by Robespierre as ‘a timid conspirator, viewed with contempt by all parties, ceaselessly working to obscure the light of philosophy with the perfidious hodge-podge of his mercenary rhapsodies,’² he was the last of the great French Enlightenment *philosophes*: at once academician, encyclopedist and revolutionary. He was a mathematician and one of the leading statisticians of his day, an economist, a philosopher and a politician. He made profound and lasting contributions to the analysis of voting and the paradoxes of social choice and thereby to understanding deep and still unsolved problems for the practice of democracy—how to ascertain ‘the will of the people’--contributions that are still debated and built upon today. As an economist he was both a critic of the stifling, corrupt and arbitrary economic regulations of his time and a proponent of detailed reforms for the constitution of a competitive economic order. As a philosopher he held distinctive and still

¹ O.C. in the references that follow refers to the still standard edition of Condorcet’s collected works: *Oeuvres de Condorcet* ed. Arthur Condorcet O’Connor and Francois Arago, Paris: Firmins Didot 1847-1948 (12 volumes) (rep. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstadt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag (Günther Holzboog), 1968).

² *Robespierre: Textes choisis* ed., Jean Popperon. Paris: Editions Sociales, 1974. t. 3, p. 172 cited in Condorcet 2004: 74 fn.

controversial views about the probabilistic character of human knowledge³, about the relations between reason and moral sentiments, and about both the conflict and connectedness of values. He identified the distinctive features of modern despotism before Alexis de Tocqueville and the contrast between ancient and modern liberty before Benjamin Constant. As a politician he was for four years an increasingly central figure in the French Revolution; and his constitutional ideas about how to resolve and contain political conflict and organize representative democracy are of continuing relevance today, while his educational ideas about how to secure universal instruction and thus public enlightenment had a far-reaching influence on the French educational system.

Condorcet was a thoroughly secular and relentlessly anti-clerical advocate of the cause of liberty, equality and 'the rights of man'—which he understood to imply equal rights for all human beings. He campaigned tirelessly against both old and new forms of tyranny. At first a monarchist, then a republican, he evolved, even as the revolution turned into an orgy of despotism and violence, into a resolute democrat. His humanitarian activism expressed his principled opposition to slavery, imperialism and cruel punishments, including the death penalty. Condorcet's ideas about progress and perfectibility have from the beginning been dismissed, from both the right and the left, as 'utopian' and 'naïve,' and he has been described as radical in theory but timid in practice. Yet his constant concern was not to formulate impeccably correct idealized schemes but rather to discover how his principles could contribute to designing political frameworks and guiding social actions, thereby hastening the human progress in whose necessity he continued, even in his last dark days, to believe.

Life

Condorcet's uncompromising hostility to religion may well have flowed from his early childhood experiences. He was an only child, his father, a cavalry captain with a

³ He published an edition of Pascal's *Pensées* (O.C. III: 635-662), 'to 'Voltaire's great satisfaction' (635) criticizing Pascal's radical scepticism and endorsing Voltaire's epistemological modesty. There are, he wrote, 'sure means of arriving at very great probability in some cases and, in very many, of estimating the degree of that probability (641).

noble title, having died when he was three. His devout, over-protective, twice-widowed mother dedicated him to the Virgin, making him wear a skirt and pinafore until the age of eight. His first teacher was a Jesuit and he was then sent to a Jesuit school in Rheims.⁴ He later composed, but never published, his little-known 'Anti-Superstitious Almanack,' replacing the traditional Saints' days with commemorations of opponents and victims of intolerance and accounts of 'the assassinations, massacres, seditions, wars, tortures, poisonings, evils and scandals' that had formed the entire history of the Catholic clergy (O.C. I: 256).

From Rheims he went on to the Collège de Navarre in Paris, where his exceptional talent for mathematics became apparent and he decided to become a professional mathematician, publishing studies of the integral calculus and 'the three body problem' These were acclaimed as outstanding by leading mathematicians, among them Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, who became his patron, ally and promoter, facilitating his election to the Academy of Sciences, of which he became perpetual secretary, and inducing him to contribute to preparing the *Encyclopédie*. He became a distinguished academician, was admitted to the French Academy and various international academies, and he produced a stream of mathematical papers with a practical bearing, the most important being on the calculus of probabilities, with striking implications for jurisprudence and 'political arithmetic.' He wrote a series of lives of the academy's scientists that won him a literary reputation and were lavishly praised by Voltaire. Nearly fifty years his senior, Voltaire recognized in Condorcet a love of liberty and justice equal to his own and remarked that he was the equal of Pascal in many respects and much Pascal's superior in some. Together with d'Alembert, Condorcet visited Voltaire at Ferney, actively supported his campaigns against judicial arbitrariness and later wrote remarkable short biographies of both Voltaire and Turgot.

D'Alembert also introduced him to his companion Julie de l'Espinasse, at whose brilliant salon he encountered the various friends and allies of the philosophes.

⁴ 'Humiliation and opprobrium,' he later wrote, 'are the natural state of Christians.' He later recalled that the teachers 'being celibate and proclaiming their avoidance of women' were corrupters of their pupils and that this happened 'very often and always among ecclesiastical teachers and monks' (Badinter and Badinter 1988: 19-20).

Observing his combination of awkward shyness and driving passion, they called him a ‘snow-capped volcano’ and an ‘enraged sheep’ (O.C. I: clxij). He was thenceforth in contact with the leading Enlightenment figures of the time, both at home and abroad, including Adam Smith, Cesare Beccaria and David Hume and later Tom Paine, and also Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. He admired the 1776 Declaration of Independence, describing it as ‘a restoration of humanity’s long-lost title-deeds’ (O. C. VIII: 11). He closely followed and wrote a string of pamphlets about the progress of liberty in America and on the worldwide impact of the American revolution, one of which led to his being named ‘Honorary Citizen of New Haven, Connecticut.’

In 1786 he married the remarkable, independent-minded Sophie de Grouchy. Twenty years younger than he, a philosophe herself, she translated Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, appending her own *Letters on Sympathy* (de Grouchy 2008), differing on significant points with Smith. She shared ideas with her husband, whom she clearly influenced, in what became a deeply loving relationship. Her salon was among the most famous of the time and became an important centre of republican activity. And the two of them, along with Thomas Paine and two others, were to found the first Republican club in July 1791, publishing a new journal, *Le Républicain*.

His other great mentor, apart from d’Alembert, was Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot—the very model of the enlightened administrator, appointed Minister of Finance by Louis XVI in 1774. For Turgot humanity’s progress was inevitable, but in the here and now fiscal reforms were urgently needed: free trade across the French provinces, the end of compulsory unpaid labour by the peasants on the roads, a single land-tax for all property-holders not excluding the clergy, a system of elected local assemblies, the dismantling of feudal privileges and the promotion of commerce. Inevitably, all this threatened too many vested interests and Turgot was dismissed within two years, to Condorcet’s despair. He wrote to Voltaire of the ‘fine dream’ that was over: ‘I shall return to geometry and philosophy. It leaves one cold to work only for fame, after imagining for a while one was working for the public good’ (O.C. I: 115). Turgot had appointed him Inspector General of the Mint, a post he retained until 1791. In this capacity, he made a series of technical contributions to practical problems such as the

building of canals⁵ and the measurement of tonnage in ships and he worked out the first coherent account of insurance. Turgot had a decisive influence on Condorcet's development. Condorcet not only shared Turgot's vision of progress, his belief in free trade and freedom of contract and his idea of the need to institute locally elected assemblies, but he was also at one with Turgot's rejection of the utilitarians' narrow view of self-interested motivation, with his concern to protect the poor from market failures and, above all, with his commitment to practical political engagement.

In the late 1780s Condorcet was writing pamphlets, proposing constitutional and other reforms and declarations of rights, as well as formulating the thoughts on despotism included here. In addition he co-founded a society of radical aristocrats and an anti-slavery society. Though he failed to be elected to the Estates General in 1789, he was elected to the municipality of Paris and was then chosen by the Parisians to represent them in the Legislative Assembly, the new national Government, in which he rose quickly to become one of its secretaries, then its President, and played a crucial role in devising the representative system of the commune of Paris. He drafted most of its addresses, including a comprehensive scheme to reorganize state education, which was to lay the foundation for France's educational system. The King's attempted flight in June 1791 was a key personal moment: he moved sharply to the left, alienating many friends and allies by declaring for the republic. He then lent his support to the sans-culottes and the installation of Danton as Minister of Justice and drafted the memorandum which led to the King's suspension and the summoning of the National Convention. He foresaw the danger of a civil and religious war, soon to be increased by a foreign war and judged that nothing could arrest the vengeance of the people. In vain, he tried to resist the revolution's violent and despotic course. Yet he remained silent in face of the September massacres in 1792, when some 1200 trapped prisoners—half the prison population of Paris-- were butchered in a wave of uncontrolled mob violence. (His essay on the meaning of the word 'revolutionary,' included here, represents his attempt to grapple with the question of justifying exceptional measures in exceptional circumstances). He even sympathized with 'the people' rather than the victims (who included priests and aristocrats but also women

⁵ 'The navigational and engineering challenges were formidable, and Condorcet's research was instrumental in demonstrating the flaws in existing proposals for the tunnels for the new canals,

and young boys), writing of the ‘unhappy and terrible situation’ in which ‘a naturally good and generous people is constrained to engage in such acts of vengeance’, though describing them later as having ‘defiled the Revolution.’⁶ The Convention put the King on trial, despite Condorcet’s objection to its assuming a judicial function, and it pronounced the death penalty, against his opposition (though he voted for a severe penalty short of death). He became the head and most influential member of the Convention’s constitutional committee, but the carefully elaborated constitution (the first European document of a representative democracy) he largely drafted was ruthlessly buried in favor of another, hastily drafted by the Jacobins, who accused Condorcet’s of federalizing France. His severe criticism of this alternative, his denunciation of the purge of the Girondists and his protests against the ever more violent conduct of the Montagnards could only have one outcome: a charge of conspiracy and the Convention’s order for his arrest.

He found asylum in the home of Madame Vernet, under whose protection he resumed his life-long project of writing a large-scale *Tableau*; eventually, however, he realized that the *Esquisse* was all he would be able to complete. In addition to all this, he also found time to write a primer to teach schoolchildren how to count, to send secret memos on the conduct of the war against the Coalition to the Committee of Public Safety and even to work on some problems in higher mathematics. He corresponded in code with Sophie, who visited him secretly and, in order to survive and protect their daughter Eliza’s property, was compelled to divorce him. The tragic letter and testament he wrote to Eliza is included here. After nine months, he managed to escape his hostess’s watchful eye and, thinking her in danger, sought refuge, unsuccessfully, with the Suards, one-time close friends in the countryside. Dressed as a peasant under an assumed name, he was arrested and found dead next day in his prison cell.

The *Esquisse*

whose design would have made it impossible for boats to pass through’ (Williams 2004: 21).

⁶ Badinter and Badinter 1988: 487, 490. He also wrote of ‘drawing a veil over these events’ (486). The Badinters’ biography examines this story (484-91), offering a political answer to the question of why Condorcet remained silent, the gist of which is that to have denounced the massacre would have exposed him to the charge of treason.

We do not know whether the title of this text, sometimes described as ‘the testament of the Enlightenment,’ was chosen by Condorcet himself, by Sophie or by the publishers who printed it a year after his death. Eliza noted, fifty years later, in the still standard collected edition of her father’s works, that he had always called it a ‘prospectus’, since it was only to be ‘the preface of an immense work. She retained the title of *Esquisse* because it had been rendered ‘sacred by the celebrity of this work’ (O.C. VI: 281). Readers should bear this in mind, alongside the definition of ‘esquisse’ in the *Encyclopédie* as ‘a kind of drawing without shading and unfinished.’ Composed in the shadow of the guillotine with scarcely any books to hand, it is no cool survey of world history. If read as a completed work, the ‘sketch’ could be criticized, not unjustly, as a caricature of enlightenment rationalism, with its zig-zag narrative of light eventually overcoming the forces of darkness and its Manichean theme of the deceivers and the duped, its ‘polemical psychology’⁷ of conscious conspiracies and corresponding blindness to the social structuring of life and its faith that science would promote ever greater virtue and happiness. It should rather be read as a distilled summation of the lessons Condorcet drew from his reflections on mankind’s past at what seemed, and was, a decisive world-historical moment. As hope for his own survival ebbed away, the question was: what grounds for hope could such reflection offer for future generations.

Consider first the very idea of progress. It was the young Turgot who, while still an *abbé*, had launched the Enlightenment idea of progress at a lecture at the Sorbonne in 1750. Manners, he declared,

are gradually softened, the human mind is enlightened, separate nations draw nearer to each other, commerce and policy connect at last every part of the globe, and the total mass of the human race, by alternating between calm and agitation, good and bad, marches always, however slowly, towards greater perfection.⁸

Condorcet accepted this picture, but he radicalized it. He had no time for Turgot’s surviving quasi-religious reasoning (no Providence! no theodicy!), or for Turgot’s granting a positive, civilizing role to medieval Christianity. And whereas Turgot saw

⁷ The phrase is Peter Gay’s (Gay 1969, v. 2: 122).

⁸ Turgot 1913-23, v. 1 : 215-16.

enlightenment as located in individual geniuses scattered uniformly across history and diffused from above by benevolent monarchies, Condorcet stressed public education's role in bringing about mass enlightenment. In short, Condorcet secularized and democratized the idea of progress.⁹

We should also note the French titles that both authors used: for both of them *progrès* was *les progrès*, in the plural. Like Turgot, Condorcet intended progress in different areas of human activity—specifically, pure or theoretical science, applied science or technology, artistic expression and moral conduct. These proceed unevenly and with differing dynamics. ‘We pass,’ he wrote, ‘by imperceptible steps from the bruteto the savage and from the savage to Euler and to Newton’ (O. C. VI: 346). Concerning scientific progress there are really two stories that unfold within the span of human history, which Condorcet saw as divided into nine ‘epochs’ and a tenth yet to come.. The first story, beginning with the tribal peoples of the first epoch is the story of applied knowledge, of the practical or mechanical arts developing and perfecting the means of satisfying needs, from making weapons and cooking to navigation and medicine, the achievement of artisans constantly developing across history, driven by the human motive of invariably seeking what is useful and pleasurable. The second story, which begins with the Greeks in the fourth epoch and culminates in the ninth, as prelude to its indefinite prolongation in the tenth, is the story of speculative knowledge. Thus the ‘scholars and scientists of Greece’ developed ideas that led to ‘the bold systems of Descartes and the philosophy of Newton’ The two stories intersected as this scientific progress, driven by insatiable human curiosity, began, once it took off, to drive technological change forwards. Thenceforth cumulative theoretical discoveries would beget ever more practical inventions, and vice versa.

The eighth epoch saw the one key technological innovation that heralded irreversible mass enlightenment: the invention of printing. This ended forever the monopoly of esoteric knowledge by the sacerdotal class, enabling the unlimitable spread of scientific truths and ensuring that they would be tested, refined and rendered

⁹ See Manuel 1962: 62-81.

accessible to non-experts. And as they become common property, these truths would, in the forthcoming tenth epoch, also expand in scope to embrace the human sciences and thus the whole of social and political life, and serve as the foundation for ‘the social art.’ They would, Condorcet believed, be based on quantifiable evidence and on a mathematical theory capable of ever-greater precision, applying ‘the calculus of combinations and probabilities,’ expressed in a universal language. The social art would then lead, first at home and eventually across the globe, to ‘the perfection of laws and public institutions’ and the ‘reconciliation, the identification of the interests of each with the interests of all.’

Condorcet says precious little here about the third domain of human activity indicated above, namely, artistic expression, and what he does say may seem strange to us today. Regarding ‘the fine arts’ he distinguishes between what belongs ‘properly to the progress of the art itself’ and what is ‘due only to the talent of the artist.’ Rejecting the ‘prejudice’ that the ancients surpassed the moderns--that ‘the most sublime and moving beauty has already been apprehended’--his idea is that the role of individual talent will matter less and less and the most modern works will be those which ‘really deserve preference’ because they are the most effective in conveying ‘the simpler, more striking, more accessible aspects of beauty.’ These are the conventional views of a man of the Augustan Age, for whom the fine arts—painting, poetry and music--were there to please according to rules on the way to being mastered and perfected.

What, then, of moral progress? Condorcet was an egalitarian and, as the tenth epoch makes clear, the equality he cared about was an equality of rights that could be brought about through willed institutional and political change: the ‘social art.’ The inequalities to be progressively diminished were those that are social, not ‘natural and necessary’: that is, inequalities of wealth, social status and education. Some of the implications he drew from this position went well beyond the conventional thinking of the times. He was, you might say, the first social democrat. He advocated equal rights for women, civil marriage and divorce, special homes and hospitals for unmarried mothers, birth control, free secular education for all (male and female) and schemes that anticipate Social Security (with publicly funded provision for old age,

widows' pensions and child support) and a permanent League of Nations. His vision was indeed global, though, it is true, he never doubted that 'the sweet blessings of civilization' were European and speculated that the colonists in America would 'either civilize or bring about the disappearance even without conquest of the savage nations' still living there.

Attaining 'greater equality in the conditions of the social pact' would in turn bring about a moral transformation of everyday life: it would facilitate 'listening to the deliverances of reason and conscience' upon conduct and 'exercising those gentle sentiments which identify our happiness with those of others.' Under such conditions there would flourish that 'fine and delicate sensibility which nature has implanted in the hearts of all and whose flowering waits only upon the favourable influence of enlightenment and freedom.' Here, as in his letter to Eliza, we can hear echoes of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* but also the influence of Sophie, who, in her nuanced and partially critical development of Smith's ideas, stressed the ways in which humans' innate sympathy could be nurtured by education and social institutions.

These different *progrès*, or forms of progress, were for Condorcet inseparable, for, as he wrote, 'nature links together truth, happiness and virtue by an unbreakable chain.' But what did he mean by this? For Sir Isaiah Berlin, this phrase epitomizes the 'central dogma of the Enlightenment,' albeit penned by 'one of the best men who ever lived'¹⁰—a denial, in Berlin's view, of value pluralism, expressing the illusory and ominous doctrine that 'there is a single harmony of truths into which everything, if it is genuine, in the end must fit.'¹¹

One way of interpreting Condorcet's statement is as the claim that knowing the truth invariably leads to greater happiness and virtue—obviously a disputable claim. On Berlin's interpretation, Condorcet is advancing a complex meta-ethical view which can be summarized in four theses. First, moral judgments concern such matters as what is good or evil, what habits of action are virtues or vices, and what does or does

¹⁰ Berlin 1969: 167-8.

not conduce to happiness. Second, such judgments can be correct or mistaken and are, like scientific judgments, a matter of knowing what is objectively the case. Third, moral judgments must cohere with scientific judgments. Consequently, and this is the fourth and final thesis, there can be experts who have greater moral knowledge. Such a view, Berlin argued, justifies ‘unlimited despotism on the part of an elite which robs the majority of its essential liberties.’¹² Is this charge convincing?

It is true that Condorcet’s view is an ancient one—clearly defended, for instance, throughout Plato’s Dialogues. He was what is these days called a ‘moral realist’ who assumed that there are objective moral truths and he further believed that, as people become more enlightened, the probability will increase that what most think is the right thing to do will indeed be the right thing to do (an assumption basic for his famed ‘jury theorem’¹³). Thus he asks in the *Esquisse*:

Is not a mistaken sense of interest the most common cause of actions contrary to the general welfare? Is not the violence of our passions often the result of habits that we have adopted through miscalculation, or of our ignorance how to restrain them, tame them, deflect them, rule them?

Furthermore, his belief in social mathematics—in the application of statistics in collective decision-making—was based upon his assumption, stated at the very outset of the *Esquisse*, of commonalities in human sensations and sentiments and hence ‘ties of interest and duty.’ Thus he wrote that since ‘all men who inhabit the same country have more or less the same needs, and since they generally have the same tastes and the same ideas of utility, what has *value* for one generally has it for all’ (O.C. I: 558).

And yet he was aware, to an extent that few of his contemporaries were, to the diversity of human needs and interests arising out of diverse social circumstances and thus to the reality and depth of political and moral conflicts. This led to his concern with the urgency of finding constitutional ways of containing and institutionalizing

¹¹ Berlin 1998: 53–60.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The jury theorem states that if a group aims to reach a decision by majority vote, if one of two outcomes is correct, and each voter is more likely than not to vote correctly, then the probability of the collective decision being correct approaches certainty as either the group’s size or the competence of the voters increases. Condorcet’s idea is closely akin to Rousseau’s notion of the general will: for discussions of this question, see Grofman and Feld 1988 and Estlund et al: 1989.

conflict, through procedural mechanisms that would encourage deliberation, delay and the possibility of reversibility: his proposed constitution included a headless law-making body whose deliberations were to be carefully organized to avoid hastiness and the violation of rights. Furthermore (and this is where his originality lay), his conception of knowledge was probabilistic, modeled not on [axiomatic](#) geometric certainty but on reliable statistics. Knowledge claimed by a few experts must therefore be suspect; only when attained through social processes of enquiry across the whole of a community under conditions of freedom and equality could knowledge be relied upon (a view foreshadowing those of John Dewey and Jürgen Habermas). Far from favouring the idea of an all-knowing elite of moral experts imposing their superior understanding of others' true interests on the unenlightened, his most central principle was implacably to oppose it. As for the values he prized, Condorcet did, indeed, see them as connected, in the ways suggested above, but he was also, as Emma Rothschild has perfectly expressed the point, concerned with their conflict: with the diversity of individual opinions; with the shortcomings of proto-utilitarian theories of happiness; with individual rights and individual independence; and with trying to show that the imposition of universal and eternal principles is the most sinister of despotisms. (Rothschild 2001: 196).

The role of education in Condorcet's social philosophy of progress and equality may be the best place to seek Condorcet's own answer to Berlin's critique. Condorcet thought that attaining mass enlightenment through education was the most important task to be pursued by the republic, along with freedom of the press and the growth and diffusion of scientific knowledge, yet with the ambition of arriving at truths through ever-greater inclusion (as indicated by the jury theorem). As he wrote in one of his five memoirs entitled *Sur l' Instruction Publique*: 'The goal of education is not to make people admire an already existing legislation, but to render them capable of appreciating and correcting it' (O.C.VII:212). Educational progress, he thought, would be an 'indefinite' work of 'correction' and must extend across a lifetime:

It is not...enough that instruction forms men; it must conserve and perfect those it has formed, enlighten them, preserve them from error, prevent them from falling back into ignorance. The gate of the temple of truth must be open to all ages, and the wisdom of parents must prepare their children's souls to listen to its oracles, so that they always know how to recognize its voice and

are not, for the rest of their lives, exposed to confusing it with the sophisms of imposture. Society must therefore prepare easy and simple means of self-instruction, for all those whose circumstances prevent them from obtaining them for themselves, and whose primary education has not enabled them to discern and seek the truths that will be useful for them to know(O.C. VII:188).

A Democratic Theory of Liberty

a) Emancipation

The anti-slavery movement and the movement for the enfranchisement of women are the issues that best illustrate Condorcet's idea of "indefinite progress" as an answer to despotism, his most persistent concern. Among French philosophers, anti-slave-sentiments acquired momentum along with the spreading of knowledge of the emancipation of the American colonies and the prohibition of slavery in New England and Pennsylvania. Certainly, Benjamin Franklin's trip to Paris in 1778 and Thomas Jefferson's clause on the abolition of the traffic of slaves in the Declaration of Independence contributed to alerting the French intellectuals to the cause of emancipation. In this context Condorcet wrote *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des Nègres* (1781), his "best known statement against slavery," although not the only one.¹⁴ Signed with the ironic *nom de plume* of "pastor Jacob Schwartz," this essay may be seen as a "note" in preparation for the *Esquisse*. The *Réflexions* were received with both "strong supports" and "violent reactions"; they inspired the *Société des Amis des Noirs* (1788), whose manifesto Condorcet wrote the year before being elected its chairman.¹⁵ In this collection we include this manifesto, which synthesizes the main arguments developed in the *Réflexions*.

Condorcet directed both principled and prudential arguments against slavery. He based the former on the idea of natural liberty and the postulates of the unity of the

¹⁴ Popkin, Richard H (1984) "Condorcet, Abolitionist," in Rosenfeld 1984: 36.

¹⁵ On the role played by Condorcet in the *Société* see Cahen 1906: 481-511. On the impact of Condorcet's essay on France's labour legislation see Julien 1955 : 18.

Steven Lukes 11/8/11 7:05 PM

Comment [1]: According to Eric this clause was not in the final document. Shouldn't we say so?

Nadia 11/9/11 4:49 AM

Comment [2]: This needs to be checked, yet in order to solve all problems it is better simply to say that 'Jefferson's opinion in favor of the abolition of the traffic of slaves'. Yet we can check in the debates and see whether he proposed that clause

human race and of the equality of all human beings; he based the latter on the idea that free labour would increase economic efficiency.¹⁶

Condorcet reiterated Rousseau's theory that the natural sentiment of liberty was to be found in all human hearts and that no rational argument could be made in favour of slavery, not even a person's voluntary decision. "There is no-one who does not feel the loss of this [natural] liberty and is not horrified by this kind of servitude."¹⁷ Based on this premise, Condorcet defined slavery as a "crime" and countered opinions based on authority and tradition with an argument that John Stuart Mill would reiterate in *On Liberty* (1859): moral progress lay in the space between the inner sense of what is just and the general opinion; to be able, then, to resist the latter when it contradicts the former is a sign that progress is feasible, although unpopular and difficult. On this basis Condorcet opposed justificatory arguments that tend to make moral principles relative to historical circumstances. Thus 'the fact that Cicero in ancient Rome treated his slaves humanely' does not mean that 'we should detest the barbarity of the Romans towards their slaves any the less' (O.C.VII: 134). The conclusions of Condorcet's thoughts on slavery were twofold. On the one hand, he surmised that humanity would gradually and globally evolve toward a complete acceptance of the principles of the unity and equality of the human species. On the other, he thought that this moral progress would itself render these principles into workable criteria for making and judging laws. To 'reduce a man to slavery, to buy him, to sell him, to keep him in servitude, all these are real crimes,' he wrote 'and to 'tolerate this law while having the power of destroying it is also a crime' (O.C. VII: 69, 77).

Yet while his principles of justice demanded the immediate abolition of slavery, Condorcet's practical suggestions were more moderate and prudent. Like his friend Jefferson, he proposed the immediate abolition of the slave trade, not of slavery. Surmising that emancipation could provoke violent resistance and be viewed as "forced consent" (*consentement forcé*) by white people, he advanced an intermediate solution so that the masters could enjoy the service of their slaves on condition that

¹⁶ In an unpublished note of 1789, Condorcet ironized against the supporters of the inferiority of black people: "all *white* men are born free and equal in rights; a method is to be found in order to determine the degree of witheness that is necessary!" cited in Alengry 1973: 402.

¹⁷ Condorcet, *Réflexions sur l'esclavage de Nègres* (O.C. VII: 122).

they would enfranchise them within thirty-five years. The same tension between principles and practice is to be found in Condorcet's position on women's suffrage.

Condorcet's bold, far-reaching writings about women's rights date from his marriage to Sophie. To be sure, when Condorcet published *L'admission des femmes au droit de cité* (July 3rd, 1790), translated here, the idea of the civil and political capacity of married women was shared by some of his contemporaries, for instance the Abbé Joseph-Emmanuel Sieyès. But no one had yet devised such radical arguments against gender inequality.¹⁸ Condorcet himself was less radical in his politics. Scholars have spoken of an "enigma" because, despite his strong and explicit intention to put an end on the exclusion of women, his project of a Constitution of 1793 was silent on this issue and did not grant women the *droit de cité*.¹⁹

In his 1790 pamphlet that we publish here, Condorcet anticipated the main arguments of nineteenth- and twentieth-century suffragism. First, he traced women's political exclusion back to the prejudice against all functions related to the reproduction of life – in particular menstruation and pregnancy. In short, he rejected a commonplace that from Aristotle to Montaigne went unquestioned: that maternity makes women unfit for citizenship because it makes them naturally partial toward their families and unable to understand principles of justice. Furthermore, Condorcet linked reproduction to the economic production of goods and so made women's political exclusion a case of the disqualification of labour as such. Reversing a consolidated republican tradition that was in his time shared by Immanuel Kant, Condorcet deemed the idea of making wage labour a reason for political exclusion a blatant contradiction, because modern society relied heavily upon individual responsibility and a market economy. 'Women therefore fall into the same category as men who need to work for several hours a day. This may be a reason not to elect them but it cannot form the basis for a legal exclusion.'

¹⁸ Condorcet had first expressed his views on women's eligibility in public office in the second letter of his 1788 *Lettres d'un bourgeois de New-Haven à un citoyen de Virgine* (O.C. IX: 14-18).

¹⁹ Christine Fauré, "La pensée probabiliste de Condorcet et le suffrage féminin" in Crépel and Gilain 1989: 349.

As with slavery, Condorcet made the case of women paradigmatic of equality, justice and legal innovation rebutting arguments for the subordination of women based on authority and tradition. Anticipating the polemical style adopted by emancipationists like Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor and J. S. Mill, Condorcet overturned the traditional claim that women did not need citizenship because they already exercised influence on men 'in secret' by declaring unchecked influence a form of arbitrariness and manipulation that perverted social and political relations: enfranchisement would thus improve men's and women's characters while improving society. Finally, as with the emancipation of slaves, he rejected the argument of public utility as an 'excuse for tyrants [...]. It was in the name of public utility that the Bastille was filled, that books were censored, that judicial proceedings were kept secret and that people were tortured.'

b) Direct and Indirect Despotism

Slavery and the subjection of women were despotic systems of power relations, and despotism played a seminal role in Condorcet's political thought. Despotism meant to him a radical violation of liberty because it was a denial of equality. Condorcet endorsed the classical definition of despotism as the master/slave relation ('that is to say whenever they are subjected to the arbitrary will of others') but enriched and modified it so as to make it a tool for detecting forms of domination in modern democratic societies.

He made four theoretical innovations. First, he questioned the individualistic character of the classical definition of despotism and argued that any discretionary power needs to rely on a class of people. 'The despotism of one exists only in the imagination,' since any ruler needs the support of a certain number of acolytes; it thus implies a breach of equality. This was Condorcet's main difference from Montesquieu, for whom 'a single person directs everything by his own will and caprice'²⁰ and who thought that the absence of social hierarchy would facilitate despotism, since despotism derived from equality. Condorcet radically transformed this idea, distinguishing between tyranny and despotism: the former was a temporary usurpation

²⁰ Montesquieu 1989 :2.1.

of a legitimate government and a partial violation of equality, while the latter was a systematic organization of social inequality that overturned the law and caused full domination. This interpretation made Condorcet's republicanism different from the Roman tradition and more democratic. In the Fifth Epoch of his *Esquisse*, he granted the Roman republic the merit of perfecting jurisprudence and making justice gentle (*douce*), but criticized its political system because of its inequality and despotic character.

The second innovation was even more striking. Condorcet introduced a seminal distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* arbitrary power, corresponding to that between *direct* and *indirect* despotism. This led him to argue that even in a country with constitutional guarantees and free elections classes of citizens can develop which wield an indirectly despotic influence on the legal system without changing the structure of government. For instance, elected officials can become 'indirectly' despotic when their representation 'is neither equal nor real' – when, we could say in modern parlance, because of a bad electoral system or corrupt behavior representatives do not actually 'represent the nation.' Thus, whereas the House of Lords was an example of direct despotism, the House of Commons was a case of indirect despotism. Any representative democracy could become *de facto* despotic while remaining *de jure* legitimate.

The third innovation concerns the notion of indirectness. Indirectness pertained to a kind of despotism operating through 'influence,' compatible with a public sphere and freedom of speech and association. Indirect despotism can develop in a democratic or free society when social classes (constituted by honours or nobility, by economic and financial power, by religious prejudices, and by ignorance) hold an unequal power to influence the law. Condorcet listed modern classes like financiers and bankers along with traditional classes like clergy and the military and, along with Rousseau, considered interest groups detrimental to political equality and liberty: 'It is easier to free a nation from direct despotism than from indirect despotism.' Condorcet's definition of despotism thus transcended the simple violation of procedures (this would be tyranny) and referred to structural forms of domination for which no individual could be held responsible. This made his interpretative innovation

extremely useful to detect novel forms of domination within contemporary liberal democracies and capitalist societies.

The fourth and last innovation pertained to the role of the “mob”, the classical argument against democracy. Condorcet did indeed write of the ‘despotism of the mob’ (the last of the eight forms of despotism he listed) and he acknowledged that in modern territorial states mob rule could grow more readily because of geographical concentration of masses of people in a ‘big capital and big commercial centers.’ However, he did not repeat the usual refrain of animus against the people, arguing instead that the mob is not an autonomous despotic agent but is rather ‘the agent of some other power than a despotism in its own right.’

c) Equal Liberty

The most difficult text included here is the set of notes on the meaning of ‘freedom.’²¹ Written in preparation for the *Tableau*, it was never revised for publication and there are gaps in the text. But in it we see Condorcet attempting to pin down his understanding of this key concept, fundamental to how he saw emancipation, despotism and, as we shall see, revolution. Here it is worth teasing out its main claims.

Condorcet’s key idea is to link the concept of freedom to equality, so that real or full freedom for individuals presupposes equal participation in the making of laws and the equalizing of their chances of influencing them. Aware that ‘it is impossible to avoid some arbitrariness in the application of these terms’ and that his own account is relative to ‘our current state of enlightenment,’ he proceeds to distinguish between senses of ‘freedom’—what it means to be free with respect to different aspects of life (natural, social, political and personal) to which different rights correspond—and how they relate to one another, and in what ways peoples can be free as distinct from individuals. He also raises the question of how to identify degrees of freedom.

²¹ The only printed version was edited by Cahen 1914 : 581-594.

He starts with the universal condition of ‘natural freedom’, a ‘faculty’ never absolute but relative. Liberty in this general and abstract sense derives from ‘faculties which belong to human nature, faculties which all individuals have to a fairly advanced degree’ and involves intellect, sensibility and memory; but liberty also belongs ‘to animals as well as ourselves’ and is strengthened ‘with the growth of reason, of enlightenment, of fineness of moral sentiment.’ It consists in what we may call a ‘two-way power’: the ability ‘to make a different judgment, to take a different decision’, in respect of both actions and beliefs, that ceases ‘when there is just one desire to which the will succumb automatically.’ Freedom in this sense exists even when we face insurmountable external obstacles, unless, facing these, our wills are paralysed, disabling us from acting otherwise. On Condorcet’s account, natural freedom manifests itself in experience, in the moment an individual faces ‘two contradictory sentiments’ (*deux sentiments contraires*) relating to the same action and has to decide between them. Deliberation is a manifestation of freedom, both in the life of the individual and the society; conversely, liberty declines or ceases when the will yields to a desire without reflection or when there is only one dominating desire. This is also the case with societies when they yield to a despotic rule.

What is ‘social freedom’, attributable to ‘man in society’? Condorcet views this as ‘what makes an individual free in the civil order’ and it exists (in a phrase echoing Rousseau) under ‘conditions... necessary to preserve man’s natural freedom.’ Social freedom thus involves free consent to associate with others (*le choix de l’association*) and submit a certain number of their actions to common rules (the opposite of despotic domination)—necessary rules that serve individuals’ interests, arrived at by majorities but protecting minorities, and established by all participating on an equal basis.

This last feature is what constitutes ‘political freedom.’ Condorcet advanced a democratic theory of liberty insofar as he based the legitimacy of submitting to the law not merely on the inclusion in an association and the rule of law but on participation: ‘the ability to contribute on a completely equal basis to the establishment of common rules, which place an obligation on all in accordance with the will of the greatest number.’ This liberty is not an addition to an individual’s freedom, but a ‘branch’ of it: political liberty is individual liberty when considered in the domain of making

laws. Condorcet argued that social freedom in law-making means accepting majority rule, which, in turn, is legitimate only if all individuals can join in law-making.

‘Personal freedom’ (which civil rights guarantee) concerns areas of freedom that are considered separate from political liberty; it is also definable as ‘independence,’ a condition that is more enjoyed the less the law affects an individual’s actions.

Personal freedom can exist whether there is political freedom or not, that is, under democracy or despotism. Conversely, there can be political freedom alongside little or no personal freedom (he makes a distinction between *liberté légale* and *liberté réelle*). But Condorcet’s view is that genuine social freedom exists only where there is both political and personal freedom.

A ‘free people’ is one in which all who have ‘attained the age of reason’ enjoy social freedom. This leads Condorcet to use the awkward phrase ‘semi-free’ (*demi libre*) to characterize various different cases of imperfect freedom, thus understood. One is the case of direct despotism, where a subject people does not vote at all, but individuals retain some personal liberties or independence. Thus the Turks may be free, but politically they are slaves and social freedom is ‘only a remote possibility.’ Nowhere do women enjoy social freedom (although Condorcet thought that France was the only country in which they enjoy personal freedom) and that ‘some’ of it existed for Frenchmen and in a few Swiss cantons, while the Americans were ‘almost free,’ but not fully so since women lacked political freedom and slaves had no freedom at all. As he argued in the text on despotism, Condorcet held that ‘semi-freedom’ could exist in two sorts of case: first, where only some are included in the making of laws that all must obey; and second, where all those qualified take part but in ways that are not equal: for instance, when the legislative influence of the members of some group shows itself to be proportional to the material resources at their disposal or educational advantage which they have, or to some other similar factor. In the former case, there are non-voting subjects, in the latter a democratic society which consists of individuals who are relatively, but not equally, free. Thus, there are degrees of freedom, and legal liberty, enshrined in bills of rights, can exist without real or equal liberty. And Condorcet cites two other kinds of case: ‘a semi-free people with subjects,’ as with the Romans (and, one may add, imperialism generally) and ‘a subject people of semi-free citizens,’ where a minority of have political rights.

If we consider Condorcet's view in relation to modern discussions of the concept of freedom and if we are to use the now-conventional categories of 'negative,' 'positive' and 'republican' liberty, then it clearly counts as 'republican' ('a man can be called *free* when he is subject in none of his actions to the arbitrary will of [another] individual')—but it is republican in a distinctively democratic sense, because of its focus on equality (which he considered an inalienable right). Condorcet's republicanism ascribes a central role to equality, without which liberty cannot be securely enjoyed ('equal liberty' is the expression he uses). What is clear is that for Condorcet himself his conception of freedom defined a condition for measuring progress, a general criterion of judgment that allowed people critically to evaluate their social and political conditions. In this sense his was a democratic conception of liberty, one that could be used as a tool for denouncing subjection and vindicating rights. As he wrote in the summer of 1791, 'I believe that the human species is indefinitely perfectible' and that it 'is impossible to define the term limit' of this progress in the domain of freedom, peace, happiness and virtue.²²

d) Emergency and Revolution

This general criterion of freedom as a condition of progress casts light on the relationship between a government and its people. In countries in which the people enjoy the right to change government (according to Condorcet, the 'right to depose the Prince, to change the government' was inalienable), then insurrection is justified in the case in which that right is violated. In his view, criticism of people's behaviour might pertain to the manner in which they behave or else offer alternative interpretations of their right, but the right itself was not in question. A people that wants to get rid of a government and realizes it needs to do something extra-legal to do so is called semi-free because, although subjected, it has a sentiment of liberty.²³ This argument paved the way to Condorcet's justification of revolution.

²² Cited in Buisson 1929: 47.

²³ See Condorcet, "Réflexions sur La Révolution de 1688, et sur celle du 10 aout 1792" (O. C. XII : 203).

The essay “On the meaning of the word revolutionary” is one of the documents that better than any other helps us appreciate Condorcet’s theory of liberty and politics. He had no doubt that the word ‘revolution’ was ‘made specifically for our [French] revolution,’ a radical reaction against injustice and inequality that was deeply and historically entrenched in society, religion, morals, and politics. Yet his goal with this essay was not to give an historical interpretation, but rather, a normative legitimization of the French revolution.

By the time he wrote it, Edmund Burke had already launched his attack on the French revolution as a revolution against liberty (his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* came out in 1790). Burke contrasted the French with the English revolution of 1688, seeing the latter as the truly legitimate revolution because it was in agreement with the historical evolution of English freedom. The opposite was true for the French revolution, which legitimized its vindication of rights by appeal to reason and nature. The most famous reply to Burke’s theory was Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man* (1791). But Condorcet also challenged Burke’s anti-revolutionary theory in the Ninth Epoch of his *Esquisse*. Resuming one of the themes of his polemic against William Pitt, Condorcet argued in favour of comparing the English and the French revolutions in order to appreciate the different forms that revolution can take, but insisted that to do so was not to question the legitimacy of the French revolution.²⁴ In fact, the Revolution of 1789 was no less legitimate than the Revolution of 1688. Yet those revolutions were different and what made them different was the form of their claim to freedom: the latter claimed it as an extension of existing rights, the former claimed it in the name of a prior good, natural rights, to which all citizens were ostensibly entitled.²⁵

The British based their demands on their past; the French on reason itself, not having an equivalent past upon which to rely. The latter appealed to human beings as such and put into effect the idea of equality. The paradox of Condorcet’s argument was that whereas Burke, despite his contextualism, summed up his position with an axiomatic declaration (only one revolution was good or true), Condorcet concluded instead in a

²⁴ Condorcet, *Lettre de Junius à William Pitt* (O. C. XII: 328-29).

²⁵ Cf. Williams 1930: 295-308.

way that was more respectful of historical circumstances: both revolutions were legitimate, each being an affirmation of rights within its own context.²⁶

The second problem this essay discusses is ‘how are we to recognize a revolution?’ Condorcet claims that the meaning of the word revolution derives from the fact that it has liberty at its core. Thus any political change that would annul or eliminate liberty would not be a revolution: tyranny cannot be a revolution. Condorcet here implicitly advanced the distinction between ‘re-action’ and ‘re-volution, a distinction that opened the door to his third crucial question: ‘If liberty is the revolution’s goal, how can a revolution legitimately limit liberty?’

Burke used this question to condemn the French Revolution as illiberal (‘Their freedom is not liberal’). In the Ninth Epoch Condorcet proposed a distinction between revolutions that are ‘More complete and immediate,’ but also more violent and radical, as for example the French one, and revolutions that are ‘slower and more incomplete, but also more peaceful’, as for instance the American one. Yet how outrageous can a revolution be without losing its revolutionary character? To answer this question, and defend the French Revolution, Condorcet sketched a proto-theory of emergency power, perhaps the most original aspect of this essay. He reached this conclusion in two steps: first of all, he made clear that in a revolutionary situation some rights need to be sacrificed; and second, he sought clearly to define the limits of this sacrifice. ‘The purpose of the social pact is the equal and unqualified enjoyment of rights which belong to humanity.’ The ‘mutual assurance’ of those rights is dissolved when ‘some individuals’ attempt to dissolve the pact. At this point, ‘we [the majority] have the right to take steps to identify those individuals’ who want to do so; that is to say, we have the right to suspend ordinary law, which is general and not allowed to ‘identify’ or name any particular individual (or discriminate against anyone). Yet in the event of a revolution, when the social pact is broken, the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is a fact, and at this point not all rights can be equally protected, but some need to be sacrificed in order to protect ‘the more important’ among them (the right to security).

²⁶ Cf. Maria Ludassy, “La tradition libérale divisée: Condorcet et Burke devant les révolutions anglaise, américaine et française,” in Crépel and Gilain 1989 : 341-8.

We may thus say, following Condorcet, that exceptional situations are those in which a political community is forced to make a distinction among rights and to decide which of them are 'more important' or come first. According to Condorcet, this act of distinguishing consists in deciding when, and for how long, some rights can be suspended. This is necessary in order to defend 'ourselves' and moreover to avoid conspiracy or secret behavior by the 'others.' Thus,

In the 1666 Great Fire of London, the fire could not be stopped from spreading because the law forbade the demolition of houses. The furniture and belongings of people who were not at home were allowed to go on burning because the law forbade the breaking down of doors. Let us not follow that example.

Echoing the republican argument in favour of dictatorial power, Condorcet argued that emergency in revolutionary times may entail the revocation of ordinary laws, laws that are made according to accepted procedures and with no pre-conceived time limit. But revolutionary laws are conceived as provisional from the start— this is what makes them exceptional, and what would make them tyrannical if applied on ordinary bases and in ordinary times (if they lost their exceptional character). Thus whenever a revolutionary law outlasts the occasion it was intended for it becomes tyrannical. It is revolutionary because it deals with security only (of society and its members), not because it promotes violence. That is to say, it selects one right over all other rights as prior or more important (the right to survival), and declares that some other rights need to be suspended temporarily if 'the very survival of our society' is to be guaranteed. (The same argument guided President Abraham Lincoln's *Proclamation Suspending the Writ of Habeas Corpus* of September 24 1862).

Condorcet's contribution to the theory of exception concludes with an attempt to distinguish between what we would today call consolidated democracy and non-consolidated democracy: 'In short, can the power of the law in a country whose constitution has not been consolidated by a few years of custom and practice be calibrated in the same way as in a country where respect for established legislation, lasting until that legislation is reformed by a legitimate author, has become one of the primary virtues of the citizen?' Adopting revolutionary measures is required, 'not to

prolong the revolution’, but ‘to bring the revolution to fruition’ or stabilize the newly attained rights. Condorcet opposed an *unlimited limitation of liberty* (a choice that would turn the Revolution into Terror) and, moreover, avoided subjecting the law to the mercies of Republican Virtue. He turned to moral and intellectual perfectibility as the means to advance the principles of reason (rights and equality), rather than virtue or the zeal of heroism, and in this way achieved an important distinction between republics and democracies. As he argued in his essay *Sur les assemblées provinciales*, any legislation that relies on exceptional talents and heroic virtues is dangerous (O.C. VIII: 117-659).

Reception

The story of Condorcet’s posthumous reception is one of continual contestation and reappropriation. In 1795 Friedrich Schlegel, the German Romantic poet, scholar and critic of the Enlightenment, hailed the *Esquisse* as ‘rich in new and intelligent considerations, pertinent judgments and fruitful germs of thought...[it] contains some remarkable suggestions for applying scientific principles to the history of humanity’ (Schlegel 1988: 45). The original title of Thomas Malthus’s influential work, first published in 1798 was *An Essay on the Principle of Population, as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society with Remarks on the Speculation of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and Other Writers*. In 1796 Louis de Bonald, French Catholic counter-revolutionary, denounced ‘the fanatical picture that this philosopher gives of his hypothetical society’²⁷ and the voluntarism of his ‘social art’: society constitutes man and ‘to wish to change monarchy into democracy amounts to introducing a contradiction into the [social] body and its constitutive elements...the germ of whose development is the family.’²⁸ By contrast, Henri de Saint-Simon, early French socialist and prophetic technocratic visionary, praised the *Esquisse* for demonstrating that ‘the progress of civilization had consistently tended towards the establishment of

²⁷ Quoted in Baker 2004 : 56.

²⁸ Louis de Bonald, *Observations sur un ouvrage posthume de M. de Condorcet* in *Oeuvres de M. Bonald*. Paris : 1843, vol. 14, p. 468, cited in Condorcet 2004 : 66.

the industrial system. He executed the plan very badly, but his discovery was nevertheless a great step towards the establishment of that system.²⁹

Saint-Simon's complaint was also made by August Comte, founder of Positivism, who coined the very word 'sociology.' Both of these influential thinkers, while they embraced the idea of progress towards modern science-based industrial society, shared de Bonald's critique of Condorcet's voluntaristic belief in capacity of individuals to choose intelligently and shape their collective futures (Carl Schmitt was to repeat the criticism a century later). They and their nineteenth-century followers transformed Condorcet's conception of social science, with its thin conception of society and history, its focus on interacting individuals and its vision of an open future in which human beings could attain increasing freedom from both physical and social constraints, into something like its opposite. Historical laws and social determinism replaced the 'social art' and progress was now conceived as a succession of organic social systems, each with its own organizing principles of hierarchy and subordination, to be inculcated in all as a kind of social religion, ensuring social cohesion through a system of moral education.

As a social scientist, Condorcet's contributions to social mathematics had to wait until the mid-twentieth century for revival, when social choice theory, beginning with the work of Kenneth Arrow, Duncan Black and others, systematized the rather haphazard approach of Condorcet, Jean-Charles de Borda and others to explaining the difficulties of group decisions and the inconsistencies to which they may lead because of majority-rule cycles, and the conditions under which they can be avoided. His jury theorem has, as McLean and Hewitt write, been '**rousing** after a very long sleep' and indeed

Condorcet, almost single-handedly, founded an entire academic subject. The theory of voting has very deep implications for political practice and theory alike....Only recently have political scientists come to see this. (McLean and Hewitt 1994: 74, 78)

Moreover, as Arrow and others have insisted, there is a need to broaden the informational basis of social choice beyond mere voting. Amartya Sen has noted that

²⁹ Saint-Simon 1865-78, v. 37: 169-70.

this echoes Condorcet's advocacy of public (including women's) education, his interest in enriching social statistics and his commitment to the need for continuing public discussion (Sen 2009:94).

The posthumous political evaluations of Condorcet similarly reveal repeated contestation and reappropriation. Recognized in his lifetime as the last of the *philosophes*--and mocked by John Adams as a 'Man of Science, but little acquainted with history: ignorant, totally ignorant of all Writings of the Science of Government, with very little knowledge of the Human Heart and still less of the World'³⁰-- Condorcet's reputation as a political theorist did not survive his death. He was identified as a party man, although he was not one, and remembered above all as a victim of the Terror. Benjamin Constant's acknowledgment of him as the father of the distinction between the liberty of the ancients and that of the moderns, and Mill's appreciative mention of his defence of women's emancipation did not save his political ideas from oblivion. He was once more excoriated for his subversive voluntarism and rationalism after the French revolutionary upheavals of 1848 (by Sainte-Beuve) and 1871, while Jean Jaurès saw in the *Esquisse* principles of 'mutuality that are as near as possible to what we today call socialism.'³¹ In 1933, amid what he called 'the shadows of night... gathering about us,' Sir James Frazer turned with 'relief' to the *Esquisse* 's 'bright, if visionary, picture of the future,'³² while in the dark year of 1944 Alexandre Koyré saw in it 'a window opening into the future,' a work by which 'the philosophy of the eighteenth century confirmed once more that it is in and by the primacy of the future over the present that man, a reasoning being, affirms and realizes his liberty.'³³ In contrast, as we have seen, Sir Isaiah Berlin saw Condorcet's thought as anti-pluralist and thus implicitly totalitarian—an interpretation decisively refuted by Emma Rothschild.

³⁰ From an unpublished comment of Adams about Condorcet's *Lettres d'un bourgeois de New-Haven* dated 1788 and cited from Dorette Huggins, "John Adams et ses réflexions sur Condorcet," in Chouillet and Crépel 1997: 211.

³¹ Jean Jaurès, *Hiatoire socialiste de la Révolution française* (1901-1908). Ed. 1969 t. 4 p. 474 cited in Condorcet 2004, p. 73 fn.

³² Frazer 1933: 23, 4.

³³ Koyré 1948 : 151.

Conclusion

The *Esquisse* is the most influential and arguably the most powerful formulation of the idea of progress—an idea more secular than ‘providence,’ more voluntaristic than ‘evolution’ and more far-reaching than ‘development.’ In a nutshell, that idea is that, given economic growth (due to commerce), progress, in its various forms, linked by an unbreakable chain, proceeds intermittently but indefinitely into the future. It is, of course, easy to smile at Condorcet’s hopes for moral progress and at his optimism about the consequences of free trade, public deliberation, mass enlightenment and the prospects for peaceful international co-operation. Yet his world was also one beset with innumerable dangers and uncertainties. We have been living with the reality of progress and are ever more aware of its dark side and its negative consequences, as we face the threats of climate change, terrorism, global insecurity and economic meltdown. Yet the idea, which Condorcet so lucidly formulated, has dominated our social and political lives for the last two centuries and is implicit in the modern concept of democracy.

In setting out his hopes for a more decent world, Condorcet sought unceasingly to work out how his goals—of greater equality between individuals and societies, human rights for men and women, the promotion of freedom and the overcoming of despotisms—could be *realized*³⁴ and began to work out what we have called a democratic theory of liberty. Without the idea of progress, such a theory would have no point; and without such a theory the idea of progress would have no substance. We think that today both the idea and the theory are needed more than ever before.

³⁴ See Sen 2009, *passim*. for an argument in praise of this focus of Condorcet’s.

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