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Condorcet
Political Writings

Edited by
Steven Lukes
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CONDORCET

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Œuvres de Condorcet, ed. A. Condorcet O'Connor and F. Arago. Paris: Firmin Didot 1847–1849 (12 volumes): this is considered as the official edition (reprinted Stuttgart-Bad Cannstadt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag (Günther Holzboog), 1968)

Sur les élections et autres textes, ed. O. de Bernon. Paris: Fayard, 1986

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Tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain. Projets, Esquisse, Fragments et Notes (1772–1794), ed. under the direction of J-P. Schandeler and P. Crépel. Paris: Institut national d'études démographiques, 2004

Almanach anti-superstitieux et autres textes, ed. Anne-Marie Chouillet. Saint-Étienne: CNRS éditions, Publications de l'université de Saint-Étienne, 1992

Essai sur l'application de l'analyse à la probabilité des décisions rendues à la pluralité des voix. Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1785 (reprinted New York: Chelsea Publishing, 1972)

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Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres et autres textes abolitionnistes, ed. D. Williams. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003

Correspondance inédite de Condorcet et de Turgot, 1770–1779; publiée avec des notes et une introduction d'après les autographes de la collection Minoret et les manuscrits de l'Institut, ed. C. Henry. Paris: Charavay frères, 1883 (reprinted Geneva: Slatkine, 1970)

Correspondance inédite de Condorcet et Mme Suard 1771–1791, ed. E. Badinter. Paris: Fayard, 1988

'Correspondance de Condorcet et Voltaire', in *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, ed. T. Besterman. Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968–1976, vols 85–129

Principal events in Condorcet's life

1743	Born Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat, marquis de Condorcet on 17 September in Ribemont, Picardie.
1754	Enrols in primary education at the Jesuit College in Reims.
1758–59	Studies at the Collège de Navarre in Paris, where he gains recognition for his mathematical studies. His thesis, published in 1765 with the title, *Essai sur le calcul intégral*, would be read at the Académie royale des sciences in 1769.
1762	Moves to Paris to pursue his mathematical studies and becomes very close to d'Alembert.
1765–68	Publishes three important works on mathematics: *Sur le système du monde et calcul intégral* (along with d'Alembert), *Du problème des trois corps* and *Essais d'analyse*.
1769	Enters the Académie royale des sciences and is introduced by d'Alembert into the salon of Madame de Lespinasse, where he becomes acquainted with Turgot. He is named a member of the academies of Berlin, Turin, Bologna, St Petersburg and Philadelphia.
1770	Visits Voltaire at Ferney with d'Alembert. They stay for two weeks.
1773	Publishes *Éloges des académiciens de l'Académie royale des sciences, morts depuis l'an 1666 jusqu'en 1699*.
1774	Publishes *Lettres sur le commerce des grains*. Nominated Inspector General of the Mint by Turgot, who was appointed Minister of Finance by Louis XVI. Publishes *Lettres d'un théologien à l'auteur du Dictionnaire des trois siècles* in defence

of the *philosophes* against the accusations by the Abbé Sabatier de Castres.

1775 Writes a letter to Voltaire demonstrating the necessity of defending atheist philosophers like d'Alembert and d'Holbach. Publishes a series of brochures defending Turgot's economic reforms, notably *Réflexions sur les corvées*, *Monopole et monopoleur*, *Réflexions sur la jurisprudence universelle* and *Rapport sur un projet de réformateur du cadaste*.

1776 Elected 'secrétaire perpétuel' de l'Académie royale des sciences. Publishes *Pensées de Pascal, édition corrigée et augmentée*, *Éloge de Pascal*, *Réflexions sur le commerce des blés* and *Fragment sur la liberté de la presse*.

1776–77 Contributes twenty-two articles on mathematical analysis to the *Supplément* de *l'Encyclopédie*.

1777 Disappointed at Turgot's fall, decides to devote himself exclusively to scientific and academic work.

1778 Publishes *Sur quelques séries infinies* and *Nouvelle expériences sur la résistance des fluides* (with d'Alembert and Bossut).

1779 Publishes *Observations sur le 29ème livre de 'l'Esprit des lois'* by Montesquieu.

1781 Publishes *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres*.

1781–84 Publishes five *Mémoires* on the probability calculus and its application to the study of human and social events in the *Mémoires de l'Académie royale des sciences*.

1782 Elected to the Académie française (*Discours de réception* on 21 February). With d'Alembert, Condorcet engages in the militant defence of human rights, women's rights and the emancipation of slaves in particular. He supports the cause of American colonies and develops proposals for economic and political reform in France.

1783 Publishes *Dialogue entre Aristippe et Diogène*.

1785 Publishes *Essai sur l'application de l'analyse à la probabilité des décisions rendues à la pluralité des voix*.

1785–89 Edits *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* with Beaumarchais; publishes *Vie de Voltaire*.

1786 Marries Marie-Louise-Sophie de Grouchy (1764–1822), who later translates Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (with an appendix of her own *Letters on Sympathy*) and

becomes very influential both in his life and the political and intellectual life of France. After their marriage, she starts a salon that would be visited by several illustrious foreign and local political figures, including Paine, Jefferson, Morellet, Cabanis, Beccaria, Adam Smith, Olympe de Gouges and Madame de Staël. Later, Condorcet and Grouchy would host in their home the Cercle Social, a women's rights association. Publishes *Traité de calcul intégral*, *Vie de Turgot* and *De l'influence de la révolution d'Amérique sur l'Europe*.

1788 Founds the Société des Amis des Noirs with Brissot, Clavière, Mirabeau, La Fayette, Consier, Volney and Pétion. Publishes *Lettres d'un bourgeois de New-Haven à un citoyen de Virginie, sur l'inutilité de partager le pouvoir législatif entre plusieurs corps*, *Lettres d'un citoyen des États-Unis à un Français*, *sur les affaires présentes de la France* and *Essai sur la constitution et les fonctions des assemblées provinciales*.

1789 Announcement of the convocation of the Estates-General; Condorcet aborts his attempt to be elected and becomes fully involved in the Revolution. The Third Estate refuses the king's order to the Estates-General to deliberate in separate orders. On 27 June, the king orders the clergy and nobility to join the Third Estate. Condorcet is involved with several salons, notably that of l'hôtel de la Rochefoucauld and the club de Valois. He is close to liberals like La Fayette, Liancourt, Sièyes.

Along with La Fayette, Mirabeau, Suard, Jaucourt, du Pont de Nemours, Condorcet contributes to the foundation of the Société des Amis de la paix, which lasts only few weeks because of the defection of liberal members La Fayette and Mirabeau.

Publishes *Réflexions sur les pouvoirs et instructions à donner par les provinces à leurs députés aux États généraux*, *Sur la forme des élections*, *Sur la nécessité de faire ratifier la constitution par les citoyens*, *Réflexions sur ce qui a été fait et sur ce qui reste à faire*, *Au corps électoral contre l'esclavage des noirs*, *Déclaration des droits*, *Idées sur le despotisme*, *Adresse à l'Aseemblée nationale, sur les conditions d'éligibilité* and *Éloge de M. Turgot*.

1790 Founds the 'Société de 1789' with Sièyes and edits its *Journal*. Contributes to the *Bibliothèque de l'homme public* (1790–92), the *Chronique de Paris* (1792–93) and the *Journal d'instruction sociale*

(1793). Meanwhile, his attempt at reconciling radicals and moderates fails. Publishes *Dissertation philosophique et politique sur cette question: 's'il est utile aux hommes d'être trompés?'*, *Sur le mot 'pamphlétaire'*, *Opinion sur les émigrants* and *Sur l'admission des femmes au droit de cité*.

1791 Issues a proclamation calling for vigilance against the court and criticising the constitution. Condorcet's politics become more radical and he enrols in the Club des Jacobins. He strongly disapproves of the repression of Champ-de-Mars. With the king's attempted flight in June he moves sharply to the left, alienating many friends and allies by declaring support for the republic and rejecting the idea that a constitutional monarchy is possible. In September he is elected a deputy of the National Assembly (the 'société patriotique' campaign for him). Publishes *De la République, ou Un roi est-il nécessaire à la conservation de la liberté?, Discours sur les conventions nationales* and the first *Mémoire sur l'instruction publique*.

1792 War is declared (spring); Condorcet supports Brissot's position on intervention and submits a 'rapport et projet de décret sur l'organisation générale de l'intruction publique' to the Assembly. He and Brissot are criticised by Robespierre at the Club des Jacobins. He becomes a member of the executive committee known as the 'commission des Vingt et Un' and gives his support to the sans-culottes and the new Minister of Justice Danton, and drafts the memorandum which leads to the king's suspension and the summoning of the National Convention.

Condorcet remains silent in the face of the September massacres (1,200 trapped prisoners – half the prison population of Paris – were butchered in a wave of uncontrolled mob violence). The Convention puts the king on trial and hands down the death penalty, against Condorcet's recommendation of a severe penalty short of death. After the fall of the monarchy, he is elected to the National Convention and becomes president of the Comité de Constitution, charged with writing a new constitution. Members of the Comité include Brissot (who is replaced by Barbaroux) and Pétion, Vergniaud, Gensonné, Barvière, Danton, Sieyès, whose majority is Girondin. The Comité works from September 1792 to February 1793.

Publishes *Cinq mémoires sur l'instruction publique* (1791–92), *Discours sur les finances*, *Sur la liberté de la circulation des subsistances*, *La République française aux hommes libres*, *Sur la nécessité de l'union entre les citoyens* and *De la nature des pouvoirs politiques dans une nation libre*.

1793 Reads the 'Plan of Constitution' at the National Assembly on 15/16 February. With the excuse of the contingency of war, the Plan is not discussed. The Jacobins, accusing the Plan of promoting federation, form their own parallel committee with Robespierre and Saint-Just, with the goal of drafting an anti-Girondin constitution.

Condorcet's Plan is rejected in April, and in June the Assembly votes on a constitution written by Hérault de Séchelle, the chief of the new committee nominated by the Comité de salut public. Condorcet writes an *Avis aux Français sur la nouvelle Constitution*, which angers the Assembly. Publishes *Sur le sens du mot révolutionnaire* and *Sur les élections*. On 8 July, he is denounced and his arrest is called for. He finds asylum in rue Servandoni, in the home of Madame Vernet, where he writes a *Fragment de justification*, *Conseils à sa fille* and starts writing the *Tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, which by October he narrows to a Prospectus, subsequently known as the *Esquisse*.

While in hiding, Condorcet also writes a 'Lettre à la Convention' in which he accuses Robespierre of dictatorship. On 2 October he is condemned to death and asks his wife to divorce him to protect their family assets for their daughter.

1794 Leaves his refuge on 25 March and is arrested two days later at Clamart. On 28 March Condorcet is found dead in the prison of Bourg-de-l'Égalité.

1795 On 2 April (13th Germinal) the Convention finances and orders the publication of 3,000 copies of the *Esquisse*, which are presented as 'un livre classique offert à vos écoles républicaines par un philosophe infortuné'.

Notes on the texts

There are, in fact, four different versions of the text here translated as 'The Sketch'. The first was composed by Condorcet, while in hiding at Madame Vernet's, between July and October 1795, under the title *Prospectus d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*. This is a manuscript in the Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France in Paris. Three thousand copies of the second were published by order of the Convention thermidorienne at its own expense in the Year III (1795). The third was published in 1804 in the first collected edition of Condorcet's works edited by Mme de Condorcet, A-A. Barbier, P-J-G. Cabanis and D-J. Garat, and the fourth in the still standard edition edited by A. Condorcet O'Connor and F. Arago in 1847–1849, with the assistance of Condorcet's daughter Eliza. The present translation follows this last version, which claims to have re-established the text 'according to the original manuscript as drawn up by Condorcet' [*de la main de Condorcet*] (O.C. VI: 10) – which would appear to be the first version indicated above. For discussion of these textual issues, see Condorcet 2004: 229–32 and the General Introduction. The translation presented here is a lightly amended version of that by June Barraclough in the edition introduced by Stuart Hampshire and published in London by Weidenfeld and Nicolson in the 'Library of Ideas' in 1955.

Chapters 2, 3 and 7 were translated and annotated by Iain McLean and Fiona Hewitt as published in their jointly edited book, *Condorcet: Foundations of Social Choice and Political Theory* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1994). Chapter 2 was translated from a microfilm copy supplied by the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, and the original texts of Chapter 3 and

7 are in O.C. X: 121–30 and O.C. I: 611–25. The translations have been lightly amended and include the translator's notes.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 were translated and annotated by David Williams. The original texts are in O.C. IX: 147–73, Condorcet 2004: 548–58 and O.C. XII: 615–24. The translations have been lightly amended and include the translator's notes.

Editors' introduction

'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).[1] 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 hodgepodge 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

[1] O.C. in the references that follow refers to the still standard edition of Condorcet's collected works: *Œuvres de Condorcet*, ed. Arthur Condorcet O'Connor and François Arago. Paris: Firmin Didot 1847–1848 (12 volumes) (reprinted Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag (Günther Holzboog), 1968).

[2] *Robespierre: Textes choisies*, ed. Jean Poperen. Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1974, vol. 3, p. 172, cited in Condorcet 2004: 72 fn.

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 controversial views about the probabilistic character of human knowledge,[3] 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 organise 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 'naive', and he has been described as radical in theory but timid in practice. Yet his constant concern was not to formulate impeccably correct idealised 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.

[3] He published an edition of Pascal's *Pensées* (O.C. III: 635–62) to 'Voltaire's great satisfaction' (635), criticising 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).

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 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 Reims.[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 Reims 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 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 recognised 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 Lespinasse, at whose brilliant salon he encountered the various friends and allies of

[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).

the philosophes. Observing his combination of awkward shyness and driving passion, they called him a 'snow-capped volcano' and an 'enraged sheep' (O.C. I: clxii). 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, as well as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. He admired the American 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. 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, including 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 canals[5] and the measurement

[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

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 re-organise 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 the face of the September massacres in 1792, when some 1,200 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 sympathised with 'the people' rather than the victims (who included priests and aristocrats, but also women and young boys), writing of the 'unhappy and terrible situation' in which

the new canals, whose design would have made it impossible for boats to pass through' (Williams 2004: 21).

'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 did vote 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) that he largely drafted was ruthlessly buried in favour of another, hastily drafted by the Jacobins, who accused Condorcet's of federalising 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 have only 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 realised 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 who, 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*

We do not know whether the title of this text, sometimes described as 'the testament of the Enlightenment', was chosen by Condorcet himself,

[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.

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 criticised, not unjustly, as a caricature of Enlightenment rationalism, with its zigzag 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 radicalised it. He had no time for Turgot's surviving quasi-religious reasoning (no Providence! no theodicy!), or for Turgot's granting a positive, civilising role to medieval Christianity. And whereas Turgot saw enlightenment as located in individual geniuses scattered uniformly across history and diffused from above by benevolent monarchies, Condorcet stressed the role of public

[7] The phrase is Peter Gay's (Gay 1969, 2:122).
[8] Turgot 1913–23, 1:215–16.

education in bringing about mass enlightenment. In short, Condorcet secularised and democratised 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 brute to 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 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

[9] See Manuel 1962: 62–81.

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. With regard to '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 that '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 are 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 anticipated 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 civilisation' were European and speculated that the colonists in America would 'either civilise 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 epitomises 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 that can be summarised in four theses. First, moral judgements concern matters such as what is good or evil, what habits of action are virtues or vices and what does or does not conduce to happiness. Second, such judgements can be correct or mistaken and are, like scientific judgements, a matter of knowing what is objectively the case. Third, moral judgements must cohere with scientific judgements. 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*:

[10] Berlin 1969: 167–8. [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

> 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, of the diversity of human needs and interests arising out of diverse social circumstances and thus of the reality and depth of political and moral conflicts. This led to his concern with the urgency of finding constitutional ways of containing and institutionalising 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 organised to avoid hastiness and the violation of rights. Furthermore (and this is where his originality lay), his conception of knowledge was probabilistic, modelled not on 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 the true interests of others 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 concerned with their conflict, as Emma Rothschild has perfectly expressed the point with:

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.