

Keith Michael Baker

On Condorcet's "Sketch"

Marie-Jean-Antoine Nicolas Caritat de Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* – perhaps the most influential formulation of the idea of progress ever written – was first published in 1795, a year after its author's death. Conceived as an introduction to a much more comprehensive work, Condorcet's essay, hastily written while he was in hiding from his Jacobin enemies, was in part an ironic by-product of the author's political defeat. In the *Sketch* Condorcet consoled himself with the conviction that expanding knowledge in the natural and social sciences would lead to an ever more just world of individual freedom, material affluence, and moral compassion.

A year later Louis de Bonald published one of the earliest responses, a vehement critique that denounced the "apocalypse of this new gospel." For this mighty theorist of the Counter-Revolution, Con-

dorcet's work epitomized everything that was wrong about the faith of godless men in secular progress. By Bonald's account:

The fanatical picture that this philosopher gives of his hypothetical society can explain to us the inconceivable phenomenon exhibited by revolutionary France. Men were seen coldly giving their destructive hordes the order for the desolation and death of their fellow citizens, their relatives, their friends, out of pure love of their country; announcing the goal and even the necessity of reducing its population by half . . . and justifying perhaps in their own eyes horrors unheard of in the annals of human wickedness, for the benefit of . . . future generations.¹

For Bonald, the philosophy of progress was a perversion of the Christian apocalypse – a dangerous rival that substituted the promise of science for the hope of salvation while forgetting the brutal realities of human passions. It inflicted unprecedented death and destruction even as it declared the advent of univer-

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¹ Louis-Gabriel-Ambroise, vicomte de Bonald, "Observations sur un ouvrage posthume de Condorcet, intitulé 'Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain,'" *Oeuvres complètes de M. de Bonald*, 3 vols. (Petit-Montrouge: Migne, 1859), vol. 1, 721 – 722. Translations from the French are my own.

sal human happiness. It promised universal freedom at the cost of destroying colonized peoples. It proclaimed a reign of reason that could only turn out to be domination in the name of science.

In his reflections on the idea of progress in this issue of *Dædalus*, John Gray makes a similar sort of argument. In his view a more or less straight line leads from Christian notions of eschatology to the modern idea of progress, and from there to the misguided revolutionary movements of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.

But it does not tell us much about the idea of progress to assert that it is a secular version of Christian eschatology. The idea of an indefinite human advance toward a better future is quite different from the eschatological notion of an ultimate moment in which history will come to an end. Nor can we rely on Norman Cohn for proof of the connection between apocalyptic myths and modern revolutionary movements; his book establishes no such connection and scarcely goes beyond asserting a resemblance between late-medieval chiliasm and twentieth-century totalitarian movements that might somehow be seen as illuminating. Moreover, Christianity is such a massive presence in the intellectual history of the West that it would be difficult to find any European philosophy untouched by it in some way, either as a source of inspiration or a target of repudiation.

There are undeniable traces of Christian providentialism or millenarianism in the ideas of progress proposed in the eighteenth century by such writers as Turgot in France and Price and Priestley in England, to whom Condorcet paid tribute in his *Sketch*. But my own instinct in thinking about the genealogy of the idea of progress as it is found in Condor-

cet is to look more closely at the encounter with late Augustinianism that crucially shaped the French Enlightenment. And if I could choose a single text to illustrate this encounter, it would be Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques*, and particularly the reflections on Pascal's *Pensées* appended to that work in the edition that appeared in 1734.

The *Pensées* invoked the Augustinian nightmare of a humanity trapped in the torments of a radical separation from God, the dilemma of a species so profoundly wounded by the Fall that no effort could bring it grace, no human means could bring it into contact with a spiritual reality informing the universe. Pascal's was the misery of a sinner cut off from the Divinity; the fear of an individual thus cast alone into the vast, infinite spaces of the universe; the despair of a being that finds its reason inadequate and its moral apparatus depraved; the terror of one thereby deprived, by its very nature, of true communion with its fellows. Pascal's philosophy was pure metaphysical panic.

Pascal had also written the *Pensées* as a scientific apostate. Finding unrealizable the ambition to know everything, he had concluded that human beings could know nothing. Acknowledging that there were limits to human knowledge, he had declared it unattainable. He saw radical skepticism as a necessary consequence of the misery of the human condition. This is where Voltaire found Pascal particularly dangerous to humanity. "It is not necessary to divert humanity from searching for what is useful to it because of the consideration that it cannot know everything," Voltaire insisted. "We know many truths; we have made many useful inventions. Let us console ourselves for not knowing the possible relationship between a spi-

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der's web and the rings of Saturn, and continue to examine what is within our reach."²

Confronting the weaknesses and limitations of the human condition as he saw them, Pascal gambled on the Absolute. Voltaire refused the wager, accepting the lot of one earthworm among others, lost in an infinite space it can never truly comprehend, born to action in a world it must henceforth make its own. Recognizing the miseries of the human condition, Voltaire nonetheless hoped to temper them by a philosophy of epistemological modesty, a refusal of religious extravagance and intolerance, and an active engagement in the social world.

It is easy in hindsight to underestimate the immensity of the epistemological reorientation thus advocated by Voltaire under the banner of Bacon, Newton, and Locke. It consisted in the definitive abandonment of metaphysical aspirations that were centuries old (and as recent as the seventeenth century) in assuming the humiliating and uncertain position of an infinitely small being fundamentally ignorant in the face of an infinitely large universe.

Compensation of some kind was necessary to make this intellectual reorientation acceptable. Voltaire found this compensation, as did other Enlightenment thinkers, in notions of society, utility, and happiness – and in the possibility of progress. Human interdependence (the Enlightenment thinkers called it society) replaced dependence on the Divine as the ontological frame of human existence.³ Knowledge relative to human beings – because derived from

their sensations and experiences – could be made relevant to them in the practice of their everyday lives, useful to them in their pursuit of their needs, conducive to their happiness. Limited in the present, knowledge could be enlarged in the future; indeed, it could be enlarged only to the extent that its limits were accepted in the present. Progress became a possibility, and a promise, provided claims to philosophical and religious certainty were abandoned.

“It is fortunate for the progress of the sciences, as for our happiness, to forget in work, as in the conduct of life, the terrifying uncertainty to which we are condemned,” Condorcet acknowledged before the Academy of Sciences in 1780.⁴ It is not too much to say that Pascal's blend of metaphysical despair, anguished skepticism, exaggerated Christian self-hate, and radical delegitimation of human action in the world haunted Condorcet, as it did other Enlightenment thinkers. It did so to such a degree that he was compelled to take his own stance against Pascal's philosophy in 1776, publishing an edition of the *Pensées* in which he took a hatchet to the text and hammered what was left with responses drawn

Melching and W. R. E. Velema, eds., *Main Trends in Cultural History* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994), 95–120. For a far broader view of this transition, see Marcel Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde: une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), translated into English by Oscar Burge, with a foreword by Charles Taylor, as *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).

2 Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, ed. Raymond Naves (Paris: Garnier frères, 1939), 173.

3 I have sketched this argument more fully in my “Enlightenment and the Institution of Society: Notes for a Conceptual History,” in W.F.B.

4 M. J. A. N. Caritat de Condorcet, “Éloge de M. Lieutaud,” in *Oeuvres de Condorcet*, ed. A. Condorcet O'Connor and M. F. Arago, 12 vols. (Paris: Firmin Didot frères, 1847–1849), vol. 2, 404.

from the *Lettres philosophiques*, new remarks from Voltaire, and rejoinders of his own.

“Why affect so great a disdain for the physical sciences, when they have given humankind such resources to oppose the rigors of nature?” Condorcet demanded of Pascal.⁵ All those who had denied the certainty of human knowledge were correct in maintaining that the moral and physical sciences could never yield the certainty of mathematics, he acknowledged. But they were wrong to assert that there could be no reliable basis for opinion in these matters, “for there are sure means of arriving at a very great probability in some cases and of evaluating the degree of that probability in a great number.”⁶

To a mathematician skilled in the calculus of probabilities, Condorcet now began to argue, skepticism need no longer be a paralyzing affliction: it could open the way to a philosophy of probable belief subject (at least in theory) to precise expression in mathematical terms. This was the claim underlying Condorcet’s principal mathematical work, a lengthy study of the application of the calculus of probabilities to the theory of decision making published in 1782. It began with the proposition that all our knowledge is probable because it is based solely on experience – even the truths of mathematics, which depend for their apparent certainty only on the expectation that the human mind will find demonstrable in the future what it has found demonstrable in the past.

It may seem odd to emphasize the uncertainty to which Condorcet’s ideas about the progress of the human mind

5 *Pensées de Pascal. Nouvelle édition corrigée et augmentée* (London: 1776); notes as reprinted in Condorcet O’Connor and Arago, eds., *Oeuvres de Condorcet*, vol. 3, 622.

6 *Ibid.*, 641.

offered a response. Uncertainty is not a characteristic frequently ascribed to the Enlightenment. As a polemicist in the reforming cause, Condorcet could be as dogmatic about what he knew (or knew to be false) as he could be insistent, when speaking philosophically, that all that he knew was provisional, that present truths were destined to become past errors. Nor can we forget that he also presided over the most powerful scientific academy in eighteenth-century Europe at the time of its greatest prestige and productivity, or that it was from this position that he set out to bring to the understanding of human interaction (the task of “the moral and political sciences”) the kind of precision being attained in the natural sciences. But relinquishment of claims to epistemological certainty was a crucial aspect of the scientific achievements of the Academy of Sciences during this period. Arguably the greatest of these, Laplace’s applications of the calculus of probabilities to outstanding problems of understanding the Newtonian world system, rested explicitly on the postulate of human ignorance regarding the principles of order underlying that system.

In what they called the moral and political sciences, Enlightenment thinkers also started from a position of uncertainty. In a recent book on the economic ideas of Turgot, Adam Smith, and Condorcet, Emma Rothschild has done much to remind us that the world in which the Enlightenment took form was an insecure and unpredictable one.⁷ It was a world (like our own) still haunted by collective memories of fanatical violence and wholesale slaughter, a world (like our own) undergoing rapid change fed by processes of globalization, a

7 Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

world in which proposals for reform regularly met dire predictions of social convulsion. In such a world, wagering that a peaceable social order might derive from the exercise of individual freedom guided by reasoned choice, both individual and collective, was (and is) still a daring bet.

Condorcet wrote in the *Sketch* of the “terrifying complexity of interests linking the subsistence and well-being of an isolated individual to the general system of societies, rendering him dependent on all the accidents of nature, on every political event, virtually extending to the entire world his capacity to experience enjoyment or suffer privation.” How, he asked, “in this apparent chaos, does one nevertheless see, by a general law of the moral world, the efforts of each individual for himself serving the well-being of all, and, despite the external shock of opposed interests, the common interest demanding that each understand his own interest, and be able to obey it without obstacle?”⁸ The Enlightenment hope for a peaceful and autonomous order of society was here, as was the gamble that this order might derive solely from the interaction of informed individual choices; but neither was far from the recognition of a “terrifying complexity” still to be understood.

We know from the evidence of his manuscripts that Condorcet had been projecting a work on “the progress of the human mind” since the early 1770s.⁹

8 Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, ed. O. H. Prior (Paris: Boivin et cie, 1933; republished with an introduction by Yvon Belavel, Paris: J. Vrin, 1970), 152; see Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments*, 237.

9 For a fuller account, see my book, *Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 344–352.

Favored by Fontenelle in the *éloges* of eminent scientists he delivered as permanent secretary of the Paris Academy of Sciences, the phrase was becoming a common one in scientific circles.¹⁰ It was therefore appropriate that the young academician should imagine writing a history of this progress to demonstrate his suitability to enter into the line of Fontenelle's succession. Condorcet did not write the history, finding other ways to secure the position of permanent secretary. But he continued to argue the benefits of scientific progress and, more significantly, to make the case that the moral and political sciences could follow the methods of the natural sciences in securing more precise and reliable knowledge, advancing the cause of reason, and promoting human freedom and happiness.

At some point during the 1780s, following this line of thought, he drafted an introduction for a work that “would make known to humankind its resources and true destiny.” That text outlined three general propositions to be demonstrated: that the past revealed an order that could be understood in terms of the progressive development of human capabilities, showing that humanity's “present state, and those through which it has passed, are a necessary constitution of the moral composition of humankind”; that the progress of the natural sciences must be followed by progress in the moral and political sciences “no less certain, no less secure from political revolutions”; that social evils are the result of ignorance and error rather than an inevitable consequence of human nature. Each of these propositions was to become an underlying theme of the *Sketch*. It is clear, moreover,

10 Jean Dagen, *L'histoire de l'esprit humain dans la pensée française de Fontenelle à Condorcet* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1977), 18–23.

that Condorcet had in mind a kind of historical demonstration of the increasing power and freedom of humanity, a demonstration that would support the expectation that the power of humankind would transcend the limits apparently imposed upon it by nature, as by its own history. In these plans, Condorcet divided the historical record into nine epochs spanning the progress of the human mind from the dawn of civilization to his own time. But it is striking that they contain no reference at all to a Tenth Epoch that would portray his vision of the future.

The Tenth Epoch did not finally appear in Condorcet's drafts for a work on progress until the period after July of 1793, when he was driven into hiding by political defeat. He was to devote the remaining nine months of his life to the actual composition of the *Sketch* and to other substantial fragments of the larger work on the progress of the human mind to which it was intended as an introduction. And even though the basic conception of the *Sketch* had been formulated some years earlier, it is nevertheless true that the work bears the imprint of the French Revolution, most notably in the appearance of the Tenth Epoch itself. In a sense, the earlier nine parts of the story Condorcet had envisioned now became a preparation for the Tenth Epoch, which seems simultaneously to condense the exaltation of the Revolution and to project it far into the future. The urgency of the moment is reflected in the style of the work itself, as Condorcet piles phrase after phrase, hope after hope, into sentences that extend into paragraphs almost as indefinite as the progress they attempt to picture.

The *Sketch* also reflects a profound sense of defeat. Driven into hiding by the Jacobins, Condorcet saw the Revolution as betrayed by men he regarded as

charlatans; politicians who had misrepresented its principles and misdirected its energies; terrorists who had sacrificed reasoned debate to fanatical manipulation, freedom to tyranny, the promise of the moderns to a false nostalgia for the ancients. The heightened vision of progress represented by the Tenth Epoch now became the consolation of the defeated philosopher, the warrant that despite the frustrations of the political moment the transformation of human existence promised by the Revolution could nevertheless occur in the long run.

It would be a massive understatement to say that Condorcet's forecast of advances in science, technology, and medicine has held up better than his anticipations of progress in ethics and politics. It is easy, two centuries later, to be appalled at the naïveté (or should we rather be ashamed at the unrealized generosity?) of his hopes for the end of colonization; to be embarrassed at the failure of his prediction that European peoples would be led, by principles of benevolence or through rational calculation of their interests, to end exploitation and foster universal emancipation; to sense the arrogance of his expectation that non-European peoples would readily embrace new truths and accept their blending into the fraternity of a cosmopolitan civilization. Bonald, only the first to recognize a polemical opportunity here, was not above doctoring Condorcet's text to foist upon it the worst possible interpretation of his remark that the progress of civilization might result in the dispersion or disappearance of some primitive peoples. This was his chance for payback against Enlightenment critiques of colonization undertaken in the name of Christ. Did philosophy have any more right than Christianity, Bonald demanded, to "cause the dis-

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appearance of [*faire disparaître*] the peaceful inhabitants of these distant regions?"¹¹

It is also easy, in retrospect, to smile at the assurance that freedom of trade, elimination of monopolies, destruction of obstacles to individual participation in economic affairs, and equality of public instruction would necessarily come together to prevent the vastly disproportionate distribution of wealth within nations and among them. But *laissez-faire* was still new in the eighteenth century, as Emma Rothschild has reminded us, and Condorcet did not claim that economic principles had been established once and for all. Nor did he deny that their application might be refined in the light of practice and tuned by government action. His view of the progress of the human mind was that it was always subject to correction: never more than provisional, truths of one moment could be expected to become the errors of another. Holding that human rights could be logically derived from the nature of individuals as sensual beings, he was nevertheless quick to emphasize how abstract these principles remained, how far they were from being fully understood, how complex a matter it would be to institute them in particular situations.

Nor was Condorcet offering a blueprint for scientific rule, as Bonald

11 Bonald, "Observations," 757. Bonald omitted Condorcet's qualification that the process of civilization would be accomplished "even without conquest," and combined and supplemented parts of two passages from the *Sketch* (see below, pages 67–68) to produce a more damning version: "It is possible, says Condorcet, that some savage nation in the vast regions of north America that knows no law but brigandage will reject the delights of this perfected civilization; but reduced to a small number, pushed back themselves by the civilized nations, these peoples will finish by disappearing entirely, or being lost in the midst of these nations."

charged. His goal was not social engineering carried out under the aegis of a technocratic state. To the extent that his social art was the art of legislation, he thought it would ultimately do best in doing little. Its purpose was to open up as wide a field as possible for the exercise of individual freedom, the play of free and informed individual choice, and the expression of sentiments of benevolence. Doubtless, there were tensions in his thinking, particularly in its early stages, between the claims of scientism and the principles of democracy. His work on decision theory had sought to resolve these tensions by exploring voting conditions under which majority rule might be regarded as rational. At times under the Old Regime, when it seemed that the monarchy could be a vehicle for enlightened political reform, he was willing to argue that the right to participate in political decision making was secondary to the need for rational decisions.

But his views changed. By the time he wrote the *Sketch* he was ready to insist that individual rights could only be secured by majority rule. "Doubtless there are matters on which the majority might perhaps decide more often in favor of error and against the common interest of all. But it is still up to the majority to define which matters must not be subject immediately to its own decision, to identify those whose reason it believes should be substituted for its own, and to determine the procedure they must follow to arrive more assuredly at the truth; and it cannot abdicate the authority to decide whether or not their decisions have violated the common rights of all."¹²

It was therefore a crucial feature of Condorcet's thinking that scientific

12 Condorcet, *Esquisse*, 150.

truths, always subject to correction, must never be propagated as dogmas. His educational proposals during the Revolution insisted on the distinction between *education* and *instruction* he saw as crucial in differentiating modern liberty from that of the ancients. *Education* meant the inculcation of truths as dogmas, the institutionalization of habits of obedience, the subjection of the individual to the community. *Instruction* meant the teaching of the critical reasoning that was the necessary basis for individual judgment and the exercise of independence; it meant the exposition of current truths—whether in the natural, political, or moral sciences—as no more than provisional. In Condorcet’s view modern society and individual liberty could be served only by public instruction understood in this sense. But even then, such instruction could be neither mandatory nor exclusive of the teaching of other views, nor could a political authority be allowed to decide the curriculum. Even the constitution, he argued, could be taught only as a provisional formulation, subject to advances in the understanding of the principles underlying it.

We are still a long way here from the religion of social progress offered by Saint-Simon and Comte, from the historical determinism proposed by Marx and Engels, and from the twentieth-century subjections of humanity in the name of laws of society or history. Notions of society and history had to thicken, as they rapidly did in the nineteenth century, for these conceptions to appear. Bonald himself announced the sociological turn in defining “the great question that divides men and societies in Europe: whether man makes himself and makes society, or society makes itself and makes men.”¹³ Saint-Simon and

13 Bonald, “Observations,” 742.

Comte were to follow his lead. In comparison with theirs, Condorcet’s conception of society and history was still relatively thin: his story began with a model of the individual mind, not with a premise about necessary social relations; its division into epochs did not correspond (much to Comte’s frustration) to any succession of systemic social orders. Condorcet did not reveal the work of history on human beings; he pointed to the work of human beings in history. Nor did he invoke historical laws or sociological determinism as the basis for a theory of social organization. His conception of the social art was resolutely antihistorical, open to the possibilities of the future rather than subject to the determinisms of the past. It was also resolutely individualistic, aimed at widening the human capacity to choose intelligently for oneself, in individual matters as in collective. The only historical law he saw might be called the law of the open future: the tendency of humankind to secure increasing freedom from constraints of physical nature and those of its own making. He thought this tendency would hold, only because freedom would beget freedom through informed choice and reasoned action.

Richard Rorty has suggested the importance of holding to the goal of universal emancipation proclaimed by the Enlightenment while abandoning the epistemological blend of rationalism and positivism upon which its hopes for emancipation were based.¹⁴ The language of science has been useful for many purposes, but it has not served us well in our thinking about ethics and

14 Richard Rorty, “The Continuity Between the Enlightenment and ‘Postmodernism,’” in Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hanss Reill, eds., *What’s Left of Enlightenment? : A Postmodern Question* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), 19–36.

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politics. It is irrefutable that the growth of scientific and technical knowledge has magnified human capacities to inflict harm as much as those to achieve well-being. Knowledge in itself does not make human beings good; it seems far from eradicating evil. But neither is it clear that the balance of malevolence and benevolence within and among human beings is fixed and constant. Some conditions seem more conducive to benevolence than others.

Condorcet allowed for an uncertainty at the very heart of his philosophy of history. He did not know whether to argue that progress must be indefinite because it is unlimited, or indefinite because one cannot know what its limits might be. We sense those limits more clearly in our age of global warming, randomized terror, and virtually universal insecurity. If Condorcet moved from promise to assurance, and at least some of his successors moved from there to historical inevitability, it may be time for us to move back toward Voltaire's offer of hope and possibility – not forgetting the latter's sense of responsibility.¹⁵

Time will tell if we have left it too late. Condorcet's expectations for a more decent world – for universal human rights, individual autonomy, and a measure of equality between individuals and nations – may now seem far from assured. But we can still look for opportunities to move toward these goals. Does anyone have a better idea?

15 On this theme, see Pierre-André Taguieff, *Du progrès : biographie d'une utopie moderne* (Paris : Éditions J'ai Lu, 2001), esp. 183 – 184.