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Condorcet's Utopianism: Faith in Science and Reason

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If man is able to predict, with almost complete assurance, the phenomena of which he knows the laws; and if, even when these laws are unknown to him, he is able, because of the experience of the past, to foresee, with great probability, the events of the future; why would one regard as a fanciful project, tracing, with some pretense to truth, the picture of the future destinies of the human species on the basis of its history? The sole foundation for belief in the natural sciences is this idea that the general laws, both known and unknown, which organize the phenomena of the universe, are necessary and constant; why should this principle be less true for the development of the intellectual and moral faculties of man, than it is for the other operations of nature? Finally, while some opinions, formed because of the experience of the past, relative to objects of the same order, are the sole rule of conduct for the wisest of men, why should the philosopher be prohibited from supporting his conjectures on this same basis, provided that he does not attribute to them a certainty superior to that which is justified by the number, the constancy, and the accuracy of his observations?

Our hope for the future condition of the human race is able to be reduced to three important points: the destruction of inequality between nations; the progress of equality within each nation; finally, the real perfection of man...

The time will come, therefore, when the sun will no longer shine on the earth on any but free men, who recognize no master but their own reason; when tyrants and slaves, priests and their stupid or hypocritical instruments will no longer exist except in history and in the theaters; when one will think of them only in order to pity their victims and their dupes; in order to support ourselves in a useful vigilance by thinking of the horror of their excesses; in order to recognize and to stifle, under the weight of reason, the first germs of superstition and of tyranny, if ever they dare to reappear.

In perusing the history of societies, we shall have had the occasion to observe that often there exists a great difference between the rights that

the law recognizes for citizens and the rights that they actually enjoy; between the equality that is established by political institutions and that which exists among individuals: we shall have noticed that this difference has been one of the principal causes of the destruction of liberty in ancient republics, of the thunderstorms that troubled them, of the weaknesses that delivered them to foreign tyrants.

These differences have three principal causes: the inequality of wealth; the inequality of the conditions between those for whom the means of subsistence is assured for themselves and is transmitted to his family, and those, on the other hand, for whom the means of subsistence is dependant on the length of life, or sooner on that part of life during which he is capable of work; finally, the inequality of education.

It will be necessary therefore to show that these three species of real inequality should continually diminish, without however disappearing; because they have some natural and necessary causes, that it would be absurd and dangerous to wish to destroy; and one would not even be able to try to make the effects of them entirely disappear without opening up even more fertile sources of inequality, without carrying to the rights of man more direct and fatal blows ...

The various causes of equality do not act in an isolated manner; they unite, combine, mutually sustain each other, and their combined effect results in an action that is stronger, surer, and more constant. If instruction was more equal, it would give birth to a greater equality in industry, and therefore in wealth; and equality of wealth would contribute necessarily to equality of education; while the equality between nations and within each nation would be mutually reinforcing.

Finally, well-directed education corrects the natural inequality of abilities, rather than strengthening it, just as good laws remedy the natural inequality of the means of subsistence; and just as in societies where institutions have realized this equality, liberty, though subject to a regular constitution, will be more widespread, more complete than in the independence of the savage life. Thus, the social art has fulfilled its goal, to assure and to extend to all the enjoyment of common rights, to which they are called by nature.

The real advantages that ought to result from this progress, of which one comes to have an almost certain hope, are not able to have any other end than the absolute perfection of the human species; since, to the extent that diverse genres of equality are established to better provide for our needs, for a more extensive education, for a more complete liberty, the more this equality will be real, the more it will embrace almost all those truly interested in the happiness of mankind. It is thus by examining the progression and the laws of this perfecting that we shall be able to know the extent or limit of our hopes.¹

Condorcet's utopianism was built on his faith in the power of human reason and science, on his belief that social and political reform could be placed on as firm a basis as the natural sciences, and on his conviction that modern history would witness the inscription of humanity's dreams and hopes. Condorcet believed that the methodology emerging with the scientific revolution – in particular observation and mathematics – would lead to progress of our understanding of the world and, beyond this, to inevitable improvement of the condition of humans on earth. He had a roseate vision of human nature and human rationality, which provided the foundation for a resolute confidence in the cumulative dynamics of progress, and the basis for a future-oriented vision of human perfectibility. Frank Manuel cogently captures the utopian aspects of such claims when he writes: 'The leap from a rationalist statement of scientific methodology to wishing is not so rare in the science of society ... but the ingenuousness of the transition in Condorcet is truly disarming.'²

Condorcet's faith in the sociopolitical application of science and reason was present from his first writings and speeches. In an address delivered to the *Académie Française* on 21 February 1782, for example, he expressed confidence in the ability of humankind to discover truth and to progressively extinguish darkness and error, proclaiming: 'It is true that ignorance and error still breathe, but these monsters, the most formidable enemies of man's happiness, bring with them the mark of mortality which has struck them, and even their cries, which frighten you, only prove how sure and terrible are the blows they have received.'³ Such faith in progress grew as Condorcet became familiar with the calculus of probabilities and confident that this could be used to subject political decisions and the contingencies of life to mathematical rule. He came to call this new science 'social mathematics'.⁴ As David Williams has pointed out, there was a 'crucial linkage between his mathematical researches on probability theory and his non-mathematical essays and treatises on political, social, constitutional and economic issues'.⁵ During the early phases of the Revolution, Condorcet attempted unsuccessfully to get accepted constitutional and educational reforms based on his understanding of 'social mathematics' that, he believed, would channel passionate popular political agitation into a hierarchy of assemblies that would allow enlightened rational choice to emerge.⁶

Condorcet's confidence in the cumulative dynamics of progress was expressed most starkly in his *Sketch for a Historical Survey of the Progress of the Human Mind* written while in hiding during the radical phase of the French Revolution. In this work, he claimed that 'there is no term to the perfection of human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is truly indefinite; and that progress of this perfectibility, henceforth independent of any power that might wish to stop it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has thrown us'.⁷ He goes on to argue, as the excerpt from this work printed above reveals, that 'the future condition of the human race can be reduced to three important points: the destruction of inequality between nations; the progress of equality within each nation; finally, the real perfection of man'⁸.

Belief in progress, underpinned by a belief in science and reason, was not unusual during the late eighteenth century. Many of Condorcet's contemporaries of the late-Enlightenment had high hopes for science and reason. Most, like Condorcet, did not endorse Rousseau's attack on the arts and sciences, and rejected his dystopic view of modern humanity's descent into inequality and *amour propre*. Belief in the efficacy of science was especially strong in the ranks of Physiocrats, also known as the *économistes*, a group of thinkers who had a deep and enduring influence on Condorcet. The Physiocrats claimed that they were able to establish scientifically the key elements of economic doctrine, and argued that this science proved that only agriculture (rather than manufacturing and trade) produced value, and that the function of government was to protect property and limit intervention in commerce. Condorcet was deeply impressed with Physiocratic scientism, and with the general claim that it was possible to discover 'perpetual and immutable laws' (the phrase is that of François Quesnay).⁹ He was a close ally of Turgot, a Physiocrat who, as Controller-General from 1774 to 1776, introduced a series of reforms that liberalized the grain trade, suppressed the guilds and more generally undermined the historically sanctioned power of the *parlements* and other traditional bodies of French Old Regime society.

Condorcet was exceptional, however, in the degree to which his utopian vision became the filter for assessing historical becoming. In his *Sketch*, the ultimate significance of historical eras and individuals is judged from the perspective of the improvements already achieved and, even more striking, from the perspective of positive aspects of the utopian future that Condorcet imagined. In sum, history is in the service of the utopia whose realization it promises and for which it works. 'It is in arriving at the last degree of the chain [of the history of the progress of the human spirit]', he writes,

that the observations of past events, like knowledge acquired through meditation, becomes truly useful. It is in arriving at this term, that men can appreciate their real claims to glory, or enjoy, with a sure pleasure, the progress of their reason; it is only there that one is able to judge the true perfection of the human species. This idea, of relating everything to this last point, is dictated by justice and reason; but while it would be tempting to regard it as chimerical, it is not.¹⁰

Given the surrounding violence of the Revolution during the period in which Condorcet was writing his *Sketch* (1793–4), and given the personal dangers Condorcet was facing (arrested on 27 March 1794, he died in prison the following day, probably from taking poison to avoid the dishonour of the guillotine), such an assessment of the past, and such optimism about the future, is striking. Bronislaw Baczko has observed that the end of the Terror in France in 1794 led to an important re-evaluation of the temporal dimension by many actors and observers of the Revolution.¹¹ Before Thermidor, many proceeded as if change were a straightforward linear process pointing toward a luminous future that would fulfil hopes for human happiness and regeneration. After Thermidor, the traumas of the Terror had to be incorporated into any

understanding of change; and the result was a more complex framework that viewed history as an agonistic process. On this continuum, Condorcet shared the pre-Thermidorian mindset, even occupying its radical optimistic extreme. As he put it in his 'Fragment de Justification', written in 1793 while hiding from the revolutionary authorities:

Persuaded for a long time that the human species is infinitely perfectible, and that this perfection follows necessarily from the current state of knowledge and society, and cannot be stopped by the physical revolutions of the globe, I regarded the task of hastening progress to be one of the sweetest occupations, one of the first duties to man who has fortified his reason by study and meditation.¹²

On another continuum, Condorcet is similar to later thinkers like François Guizot and Karl Marx, who also viewed history as a secular unfolding that would realize the society of their dreams. While these later thinkers viewed historical becoming as more troubled than Condorcet, with periods of painful regression, they all shared a perspective that assessed the present and the past in terms of a future utopia. That is, each judged contemporary possibilities as positive or negative depending on whether they contributed to the superior society of the future or retarded progress towards it. For a philosopher like Hegel, the conflation of possibility and actuality was retrospective; the 'owl of Minerva' flew only at dusk; consequently, past forces could be assessed only in terms of what had come to be realized in fact. For Condorcet, Guizot and Marx, the conflation of possibility and actuality was prospective rather than retrospective; past and present forces were assessed in terms of the utopian society to be realized in the near future.

From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, Condorcet's utopia has many attractive aspects. It is more appealing than Guizot's vision of the triumph of the middle class; and it is more concrete than Marx's elusive vision (in the *Communist Manifesto*) of an 'association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all', and/or Marx's suggestion (in *Capital*) that self-actualization in 'the true realm of freedom' will no longer require enervating labour.¹³ Condorcet imagined more familiar reforms. Before and during the French Revolution, he supported the establishment of inalienable, inviolable 'natural rights'; the implementation of just and equitable laws; the abolition of slavery; the emancipation of women; the overthrow of religious fanaticism; the redistribution of wealth; the creation of a system of social insurance. As Stuart Hampshire has pointed out, the *Sketch* was 'the first and most complete statement of that radical programme which was gradually to be translated into fact in the democracies of Western Europe'.¹⁴

These commendable modern elements of Condorcet's stance are juxtaposed, however, with more troubling aspects, especially a naïve faith in the triumph of science and reason, and a seemingly unbounded faith in an enlightened technocratic elite.¹⁵ Keith Baker has referred to these aspects of Condorcet's

stance as the embrace of 'a technocratic creed: the creed of men confident in their expertise, easy in the tradition of power, convinced that problems of politics are susceptible of rational answers and systematic solutions'.¹⁶ Today, science no longer looks so benign; reason no longer appears so triumphant; experts no longer inspire such confidence. To believe otherwise is to ignore the evidence of history and to share the hubris of modern technocrats. Writing as I am (in March 2011), months after the worst oil disaster in the history of the United States, and during the frightening aftermath of an earthquake and tsunami that is threatening to engulf Japan with nuclear contamination, it is impossible to share such illusions. How many times have we received assurances from the 'experts' that it is a near statistical impossibility ('only a chance in a million') that environmental and social disasters would occur as a consequence of drilling for offshore oil or generating nuclear power? Humans have demonstrated a frightening ability to act with naïve confidence in their scientific and technological expertise.

Humans have also demonstrated that they frequently act out of selfish motives and with evil intentions. Condorcet had a more complimentary assessment, believing that rationality, collegiality and 'the moral constitution of man'¹⁷ were strong enough components of human nature to guarantee the coordination of scientific research, the overcoming of religious factionalism and political divisions, and the ultimate triumph of equality, peace and happiness. In the final pages of his *Sketch*, he imagined a world in which rational and moral behavior had become the norm.

I believe that I have proved the possibility, and indicated the means of resolving what is perhaps the most important problem of the human species: *that of the perfectibility of the general masses*; that is to say, to render right judgment, independent and sound reason, enlightened conscience, and habitual submission to the rules of humanity and justice, almost universal qualities; to stress that the normal state of man is guided by truth even though subject to error, subordinates his conduct to the rules of morality even though sometimes drawn into crime, nurtures gentle and pure feelings which unite him to his family, to his friends, to the unfortunate, to his country, to the whole of humanity, even though he is still susceptible of being led astray by personal passions.¹⁸

This is an appealing vision, but to many of us today it appears, rather, that destructive passions are inauspiciously tenacious under the thin veneer of morality. Contemporary history is unfortunately replete with examples of the disastrous consequences of less than generous passions tearing through the flimsy covering of 'civilization'. Human nature, in short, is the ineluctable serpent in our garden and, more than Condorcet and other optimists have been willing to recognize, its darker side shapes the world we live in to the detriment of the one we wish for. While rational utopias offer us a hope and a goal, they too frequently do so by ignoring historical evidence of the less attractive aspects of our natures.