

HISTORY FROM LOSS

A Global Introduction to Histories
Written from Defeat, Colonization,
Exile, and Imprisonment

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NICOLAS DE CARITAT, MARQUIS DE CONDORCET (1743–1794)

Simona Pisanelli

Jean-Marie Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794) is one of the most important exponents of the French Enlightenment. A nobleman by birth, fatherless from his earliest years and brought up by his mother to pursue a career in the Church, Condorcet chose a completely different path. His early, yet extraordinary, knowledge of mathematics made him one of the youngest members, then permanent secretary, of the *Académie des Sciences* and one of the most brilliant visitors to Madame Lespinasse's salon, known as the "laboratory of the Encyclopaedia." Here he was taken under the protective wing of Jean Baptiste Le Rond d'Alembert and met Anne Robert Jacques Turgot. When the latter became *Contrôleur Général des Finances* (1774–1776), he wanted Condorcet at his side as *Inspecteur Général de la Monnaie* (1774–1791) and with him drew up several social reform projects, which were only partially implemented.

After resigning from his role as commissioner of the State Treasury (1791), Condorcet stood as a candidate for the *Convention nationale*, the constitutional and legislative assembly in charge of transforming France into a Republic (1792). His election as vice-president was a sign of recognition of the political credit he enjoyed and the moral authority he was accorded. Within it, he supported the abolition of noble titles but rejected the proposal to condemn the sovereigns of France to death. This position made him unpopular with the Jacobin party which, now predominant in the National Convention, rejected Condorcet's constitutional project and condemned him to death in July 1793.

While in hiding in Mme Vernet's house, Condorcet wrote *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind*. Shortly afterwards, he was arrested. He was later found dead in his cell, apparently by suicide,¹ although this seems quite inconsistent with the optimistic attitude that had led Condorcet to write his *Outlines* even at such a dramatic time in his life.

In April 1795, Condorcet was posthumously rehabilitated, and the National Convention ordered the printing of 3,000 copies of his last work. The *Outlines* is considered the ideological testament of Condorcet, also known as “the last *philosophe*.” In it, Condorcet effectively summarized the conception of history that he shared with some Enlightenment thinkers, as opposed to the view that had dominated the pre-Revolutionary French cultural scene and still remained in vogue in other Enlightenment fringes. This chapter aims to demonstrate that, according to the *philosophes*, the main task of history was to prevent even the most unfortunate and poor individuals (and societies) from losses and defeats, caused by the lack of enlightenment.

Until the first half of the eighteenth century, history was often not much more than the explanation of events in religious or metaphysical terms: a single otherworldly subject determined the fate of human beings and the events that affected them, in a framework of predetermined metaphysical visions. The Enlightenment completely overturned this perspective: the study of history was no longer a passive observation of events but a reflection on human activities as the motor of material growth and intellectual development.

How did this new conception of history arise towards the end of the eighteenth century? The answer to this question lies in the change of pace brought about by the transformations of societies. Since the origin of societies (First Epoch in Condorcet’s *Outlines*), there had been long periods of evolution, characterized by changes so slow as to be almost imperceptible to the historian’s eye. By appearing stable, human behaviour could be explained by examples from the past, which were considered perpetually valid.² Consequently, before the affirmation of new scientific methods (the merit for which, in the Eighth Epoch, is attributed to Bacon, Galileo, and Descartes), knowledge of the world and social organization remained almost immutable. In the Age of Enlightenment (the Ninth Epoch), on the other hand, the pace of transformations of all kinds became relentless. The tumultuous succession of political and legal events and the rapid progress of technical and economic knowledge meant that what had previously been taken as natural could no longer be accepted as such. In the Middle Ages, everything was explained by authority and tradition. During the eighteenth century, there was a growing need to explain the social and moral order, the legitimacy of laws, institutions, and the state through reason and science rather than religion. The answers provided by the Enlightenment had a twofold effect: they “not only greatly affected our perception of man and society but helped shape man and society themselves.”³

Mere knowledge of past experiences is not sufficient to explain the structure and dynamics of contemporary society. Nevertheless, when combined with the use of reason, it can enable people “to foresee, with considerable probability, future appearances.”⁴ The Enlightenment intellectuals considered the use of reason as the only instrument capable of propelling human beings along the path of progress, allowing them to actively plan their future, rather than accepting a destiny that they believed to be determined by an otherworldly entity. This made them place the concept of reason at the heart of their program.

According to the Enlightenment thinkers, the task of the study of history was twofold: to identify and develop the means necessary to realize human projects; and to recognize the obstacles that still stand in the way of the indefinite perfecting of human beings.⁵

Observing the progress already made by past societies leads one to believe that “nature has fixed no limits to our hopes.” Consequently, man—comforted by the development of his knowledge—will be able to break down all kinds of obstacles, including inequalities within and between nations, crystallized over the centuries not as belonging to “civilization itself” but as the result of the current “imperfections of the social order.” The negative influences that have so far prevented the rapid development of a happy and egalitarian society stem mainly from religion and the misuse of the means to ensure “individual and general prosperity.”⁶

The theme of religion is particularly important because two different Enlightenment currents developed around it. On the one hand, the so-called radical Enlightenment—to which Condorcet belongs (together with Diderot, d’Holbach and Helvétius)—which rejects the idea that the destiny of humanity, determined by providence, is simply the result of divine intentions in the “theatre of the world.”⁷ On the other hand, the moderate Enlightenment, represented—among others—by Turgot and Voltaire, which tends towards the search for final causes that move the universe from the outside, independently of the mechanical causes known to human beings.⁸ These opposing positions also gave rise to diametrically opposed intentions, which Condorcet and Turgot—although linked by friendship and institutional relations—perfectly embodied.⁹

Turgot proposes a use of reason that does not completely disregard tradition and does not attempt to rid society of inequality, which is seen as the real driving force behind technological progress and economic growth, and which has been predisposed for this purpose by the Creator.¹⁰ Moreover, Turgot defines Christianity as a factor of civilization that has helped to illuminate an otherwise dark period of human history.¹¹

On the other hand, Condorcet makes the elimination of inequalities one of the central themes of his *Outlines*. Convinced that social organization does not depend at all on an immutable divine will or on metaphysical assumptions, Condorcet has no doubt that the conditions in which peoples find themselves are determined solely and exclusively by the degree of diffusion of knowledge: the more knowledge progresses, the more the living conditions of human beings improve.¹² Once the laws of nature that guarantee the satisfaction of human needs have been discovered, it is a question of making decisive adjustments in a variety of areas: political, social, and economic.

To do this, one must actively use the lessons of history, not endure them. With the guidance of reason, we must proceed to eliminate persistent forms of theocracy and regulate the coexistence of human beings through “good laws.”¹³ The latter must guarantee both the access to education for all, in order to reduce inequalities between intellectual faculties,¹⁴ and the access to the means of subsistence, in order to guarantee the exercise of substantive freedoms and respect for the

individual rights of citizens, in a new form of social coexistence. It is only in this way that “folly and wretchedness will be accidents . . . and not the habitual lot of a considerable portion of society,”¹⁵ and the realization of the common good will be within reach.

Condorcet is not the only one to seek the extremely difficult (albeit dynamic) balance between individual and public happiness.¹⁶ Awareness of this difficulty leads him not to consider his own defeat, or, in general, individual defeats, as equivalent to a definitive setback in evolutionary processes. His faith in human progress leads him to look forward to a world improved by the French Revolution, even if the actors who promoted it (including himself) will not be able to personally contemplate it. It is also for this reason that his interpretation of history as the “key to human evolution” has become an essential reference point for every reflection on progress that has developed in France¹⁷ and Europe. Moreover, his *Outlines* influenced the rise of the social sciences, especially sociology. It is not by chance that both Saint-Simon and Comte credited Condorcet with placing the concept of progress at the heart of the study of mankind.¹⁸

Extract

From *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (Philadelphia, PA: Printed by Lang & Ustick, for M. Carey, H. & P. Rice & Co. J. Ormrod, B.F. Bache, and J. Fellows, New-York, 1796), 11–23.

This picture [of the progress of the human mind] is historical; since subjected as it will be to perpetual variations, it is formed by the successive observation of human societies at the different eras through which they have passed. It will accordingly exhibit the order in which the changes have taken place, explain the influence of every past period upon that which follows it, and thus show, by the modifications which the human species has experienced, in its incessant renovation through the immensity of ages, the course which it has pursued, and the steps which it has advanced towards knowledge and happiness. From these observations on what man has heretofore been, and what he is at present, we shall be led to the means of securing and of accelerating the still further progress, of which, from his nature, we may indulge the hope.

Such is the object of the work I have undertaken; the result of which will be to show, from reasoning and from facts, that no bounds have been fixed to the improvement of the human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is absolutely indefinite; that the progress of this perfectibility, henceforth above the control of every power that would impede it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has placed us.

...

We shall expose the origin and trace the history of general errors, which have contributed to retard or suspend the advance of reason, and sometimes even, as much as political events, have been the cause of man’s taking a retrograde course towards ignorance.

Those operations of the mind that lead to or retain us in error, from the subtle paralogism, by which the most penetrating mind may be deceived, to the mad reveries of enthusiasts, belong equally, with that just mode of reasoning that conducts us to truth, to the theory of the development of our individual faculties; and for the same reason, the manner in which general errors are introduced, propagated, transmitted, and rendered permanent among nations, forms a part of the picture of the progress of the human mind.

...

It is even apparent, that, from the general laws of the development of our faculties, certain prejudices must necessarily spring up in each stage of our progress, and extend their seductive influence beyond that stage; because men retain the errors of their infancy, their country, and the age in which they live, long after the truths necessary to the removal of those errors are acknowledged.

In short, there exist, at all times and in all countries, different prejudices, according to the degree of illumination of the different classes of men, and according to their professions. If the prejudices of philosophers be impediments to new acquisitions of truth, those of the less enlightened classes retard the propagation of truths already known, and those of esteemed and powerful professions oppose like obstacles. These are the three kinds of enemies which reason is continually obliged to encounter, and over which she frequently does not triumph till after a long and painful struggle. The history of these contests, together with that of the rise, triumph, and fall of prejudice, will occupy a considerable place in this work, and will by no means form the least important or least useful part of it.

If there be really such an art as that of foreseeing the future improvement of the human race, and of directing and hastening that improvement, the history of the progress it has already made must form the principal basis of this art. Philosophy, no doubt, ought to proscribe the superstitious idea, which supposes no rules of conduct are to be found but in the history of past ages, and no truths but in the study of the opinions of antiquity. But ought it not to include in the proscription, the prejudice that would proudly reject the lessons of experience? Certainly, it is meditation alone that can, by happy combinations, conduct us to the general principles of the science of man. But if the study of individuals of the human species be of use to the metaphysician and moralist, why should that of societies be less useful to them? And why not of use to the political philosopher? If it be advantageous to observe the societies that exist at one and the same period, and to trace their connection and resemblance, why not to observe them in a succession of periods? Even supposing that such observation might be neglected in the investigation of speculative truths, ought it to be neglected when the question is to apply those truths to practice, and to deduce from science the art that should be the useful result? Do not our prejudices, and the evils that are the consequence of them, derive their source from the prejudices of our ancestors? And will it not be the surest way of undeceiving us respecting the one, and of preventing the other, to develop their origin and effects?

Everything tells us that we are approaching the era of one of the grand revolutions of humanity. What can better enlighten us to what we may expect, what can be a surer guide to us, amidst its commotions, than the picture of the revolutions that have preceded and prepared the way for it? The present state of knowledge assures us that it will be happy. But is it not upon condition that we know how to assist it with all our strength? And, that the happiness it promises may be less dearly bought, that it may spread with more rapidity over a greater space, that it may be more complete in its effects, is it not requisite to study, in the history of the human mind, what obstacles remain to be feared, and by what means those obstacles are to be surmounted?

Notes

- 1 For an overview of Condorcet's life, see at least Badinter, Élisabeth and Badinter, Robert, *Condorcet. Un intellectuel en politique* (Paris: Fayard, 1988).
- 2 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantic of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004): 28.
- 3 Charles Michael Andres Clark, *Economic Theory and Natural Philosophy. The Search for the Natural Laws of the Economy* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1992): 90.
- 4 Jean-Antoine Marie de Condorcet, *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (Philadelphia, PA: Lang and Ustick, 1796): 250.
- 5 On the Encyclopaedists' awareness of the multiplicity of obstacles that still existed and the need to devise instruments that would make it easier to overcome them, see John Bury, *The Idea of Progress. An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1920): 172.
- 6 Condorcet, *Outlines*, 251–53.
- 7 Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 135.
- 8 Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009): 219.
- 9 On the idea that part of the Enlightenment movement led to the decline or change of meaning of religious faith, see at least Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment*, 2 vols (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973).
- 10 Robert Mauzi, *L'idée du bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée française au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Slatkine Reprints, 1969): 153–4.
- 11 Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 157.
- 12 On the belief in knowledge as a typical element of the Enlightenment, see Lucien Goldmann, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment. The Christian Burgess and the Enlightenment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971): 5.
- 13 Condorcet, *Outlines*, 266.
- 14 Condorcet does not merely promote the access of all individuals, even the poorest, to a minimum level of education, capable of guaranteeing individual emancipation. He hopes that the spread of knowledge and scientific discovery will enable the broadest possible part of the population to master the laws and techniques of science. On this, see Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980): 210.
- 15 Condorcet, *Outlines*, 252.
- 16 Just think of François-Jean de Chastellux, *De la félicité publique* (1772) and Claude-Adrien Helvétius, *De l'homme* (1773).

- 17 Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 215.
 18 Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, 207.

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