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A CIVILIZATIONAL CLASSIC

Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet. *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*. Translated by June Barraclough, with an introduction by Stuart Hampshire. New York: Noonday, 1955. (Hyperion press reprint, 1979).

One of the great neglected classics of civilizational studies—indeed, one of the most monumental last wills and testaments to humanity ever penned—was bequeathed to us by a French mathematician, man of letters, *philosophe*, reformer and revolutionary amidst The Reign of Terror of 1793. This work, which usually bears the English title *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, was intended as an extended table of contents for an encyclopedic study of history, similar to those of Spengler, Toynbee, and Sorokin in the 20th Century. But it became instead, when issued by the French Republic at public expense in the Year III (1795), a primary piece of propaganda for the Idea of Progress, writ large, and for the notion of the Perfectibility of Man, writ equally large and usually disparagingly by traditionalists then and now. Published posthumously, the *Sketch* never had the chance to be finished, but it did achieve a life of its own, as a clarion call for the birth of the social sciences and as an ironic commentary on man's inhumanity to man.

Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, (1743-1794) was born in Picardy, a half-breed: father an aristocrat, mother a bourgeoisie. And he died in a provincial jail cell under mysterious circumstances, a misfit: the last of the great *philosophes* of the Enlightenment in France, one of the first intellectual leaders of radical socio-political reform, who became a refugee republican suspected of conspiracy after the regicide of Louis XVI in 1793. Robespierre said of Condorcet that he was a great mathematician in the eyes of men of letters and a distinguished man of letters in the eyes of mathematicians. His scientific patron and mathematical mentor d'Alembert described Condorcet as "a volcano covered with snow." All active participants in the Revolution knew either the *Marquis* de Condorcet or the *savant* Condorcet as one of the most representative personages of the Age of Reason and as the most influential voice of reason for scientific education and social reforms. After the Jacobins ordered his arrest for accusing them of the theft of the Revolution, Condorcet fled, and while in hiding for eight months wrote furiously to save his sanity and his twenty-year investment in the idea of the progress of the human mind. The result was *L'Esquisse . . .*, or the *Sketch*, as we know it. There had been the *Vindication of the Rights of Man* by Edmund Burke and then the claim for a *Vindication of the Rights of Women* by Mary Wollestonecraft, and now there was to be a vindication of the entire human race based on Condorcet's MSS., *Tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*.

Because the *Sketch* is better known by title than by contents, by excerpts than by overview, and by reputation than by its character, it may be well

here to sketch the *Sketch* as it appeared in English translation by June Barraclough. Also most helpful has been the last chapter of Keith Michael Baker's book *Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

In little more than 200 brief pages, Condorcet's *Sketch* attempts to survey his vision of the cosmic meaning of human life in terms of the history of science and philosophy. After a short 10-page introduction, he sweeps through nine stages of the progress of the human mind with hardly a pause from time immemorial to the foundation of the French Republic. His last or "Tenth Stage," understandably the most popular and enduring section because of its prescient prophecies, paints in only about 25 pages "The Future Progress of the Human Mind." Untroubled by ethnocentrism or by the arrogance of scientism or by the simplistic psycho-social generalizations of his era, Condorcet was able to assay the grand chronographical evolution of rational thinking in a compelling story. He wrote as if to recast the books of Genesis, Exodus, *et cetera* on through Jude and Revelations. But far more than that, he wrote in anticipation of Saint-Simon, Comte, Hegel, Marx, Spencer, Darwin, Buckle and many other thinkers down to our own time.

Note the sub-titles to the progressive stages Condorcet uses for his organizational scheme:

The First Stage: Men are united in tribes. [Hunter-gatherers learn language]

Second: Pastoral peoples; the transition . . . to . . . agricultural peoples.

Third: from agriculture to the invention of the alphabet [thus the first 3 stages are pre-historic].

Fourth: from pre-Socratic Greece to Alexander the Great [division of labor leads to specialized sciences].

Fifth: The progress of the sciences from their division to their decline [from Aristotle to Roman Christianity].

Sixth: The decadence of Knowledge to its restoration about the time of the Crusades [the Dark Ages enlightened by Islam].

Seventh: from the Renaissance to the invention of printing [the 13th to 15th centuries c.e.].

Eighth: from printing to the shaking off of the yoke of authority [the Reformation and 17th C. Scientific Revolution].

Ninth: From Descartes to the Foundation of the French Republic [18th C.: "this, the most important chapter in the history of man"].

Although Condorcet's *Sketch* gives twice as much space to the Ninth Stage, or the Enlightenment, as he gives to the Tenth, or "The Future Progress of the Human Mind," it was his extrapolation of history at the end of this work that is most often featured in historical anthologies on the Age of Reason. Condorcet's prospectus presents perhaps the ultimate optimistic vision of the indefinite perfectibility of, not just *mankind*, but *humankind*.

As Stuart Hampshire noted,

Condorcet saw the outlines of liberal democracy more than a century in advance of his time: universal education; universal suffrage; equality before the law; freedom of thought and expression; the right to freedom and self-determination of colonial peoples; the redistribution of wealth; a system of national insurance and pensions; equal rights for women. He deduced this programme of freedom and equality from a doctrine of the natural rights of man, grounded in man's nature as a being capable of feeling and reasoning. All men have an equal right to freedom, to the use of their reason and to the pursuit of happiness; when they have been educated, they will inevitably recognize by the light of reason that these natural rights override all other differences between them. They have in the past been prevented from claiming their rights by ignorance and superstition, and tyrants and priests have had an interest in keeping them in ignorance. With the discovery of printing, and the diffusion of scientific knowledge, superstition is being undermined, and will increasingly be undermined in the future. Knowledge and liberty must reinforce each other in an ever accelerating circle. . . . If there is no cosmic disaster, we can be certain of continuous progress in enlightenment, freedom and equality. (pp. x-xi).

The end of the ending of Condorcet's *Sketch* may serve as a typical passage to illustrate the apocalyptic mood, as Keith Baker puts it (pp. 370), the alternative tension between hope and desperation that runs throughout the text:

How consoling for the philosopher who laments the errors, the crimes, the injustices which still pollute the earth and of which he is often the victim, is this view of the human race, emancipated from its shackles, released from the empire of fate and from that of the enemies of its progress, advancing with a firm and sure step along the path of truth, virtue and happiness! It is the contemplation of this prospect that rewards him for all his efforts to assist the progress of reason and the defence of liberty. He dares to regard these strivings as part of the eternal chain of human destiny; and in this persuasion he is filled with the true delight of virtue and the pleasure of having done some lasting good which fate can never destroy by a sinister strike of revenge, by calling back the reign of slavery and prejudice. Such contemplation is for him an asylum, in which the memory of his persecutors cannot pursue him; there he lives in thought with man restored to his natural rights and dignity, forgets man tormented and corrupted by greed, fear or envy; there he lives with his peers in an Elsyium created by reason and graced by the purest pleasures known to the love of mankind. (pp. 201-2).

Regardless of translational difficulties herein, did Plato's Socrates of the *Apology* or *The Diary of Anne Frank* confess any higher humane spirit than this?

Had Condorcet lived long enough to amplify his *Sketch* into the "great work" that he promised, I doubt that his reputation would have been

enhanced. His quasi-martyrdom as a champion of liberal democracy, his opposition to the death penalty as judicial murder, his advocacy of the abolition of slavery and suppression of the slave-trade, and his aversions to absolutism of all sorts—whether religious, political, or philosophical—were more than enough to insure the reverence of his memory. However, he was a proto-positivist, a proto-probabilist, an elitist, and a social activist with too much courage and too little tact to survive the French Revolution. He had been personally instrumental in justifying the shibboleths—*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*—for that Revolution, and earlier he had strongly advocated a different trinity of ideals for men of science and letters—*Liberty, Truth, and Poverty*. Yet Condorcet's mysterious death seems to have been necessary for his *Sketch* to achieve such immortality as it has enjoyed.

If there were more time and space to compare and contrast the contexts of other civilizational classics, it seems obvious to me that Condorcet could be profitably studied in various parallel ways with Thomas Paine, Lavoisier, Fontanelle, Francis Bacon, Campanella, Ibn Khaldun, Vico, and even Pitirim Sorokin, among others. Instead, he remains linked with Voltaire, Turgot, d'Alembert, Descartes, Condillac, Montesquieu, Newton, Locke, and Hume, to be sure, as a patron saint of the age of democratic revolutions.

What, if anything, does Condorcet's *Sketch* mean for the ISCS?

Le bon Condorcet was time-bound, culture-bound, and emotionally-bound to be inadequate to all the challenges of late 18th century Paris. Yet he was a man for all seasons, who tried his best during his 51 years to transcend his limitations, to balance his appetites for knowledge *and* experience, for natural philosophy *and* social mathematics, and for private preferment *and* the public good. He had not our breadth and depth of views over the human experience on Planet Earth. He could not share our prudential pessimism about human nature, borne of the multiple genocides, holocausts, and more terrible Terrors since his day. He would not abandon his operational optimism even to order a peasant's omelette on his last day.

If we wrestle to reconcile two antithetical definitions of civilization, namely, Wilkinson's transactional networks approach versus Richardson's symbolic systems approach, then we may find, through a more thorough study of Condorcet's texts, contexts, and comparative texts and contexts, that Wilkinson's networks are world views, too, and that Richardson's world views are also transactional networks. In short, the Universe is so complementary that the word "the" in front of the word *Universe* is redundant. Condorcet seems to have comprehended this fact long before Buckminster Fuller. Maybe Toynbee and Sorokin apprehended this fact also, but certainly recent events in Beijing and Moscow seem to confirm complementarity. Condorcet's exquisite *Esquisse* of 1794 is a compliment to complementarity.

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