

CONDORCET (1743-1794)

I suppose that we may regard Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, born in Picardy, as the last of the 'philosophes'. He wrote much, mostly on mathematics, and on political and social topics, and the only one of his writings which has any particular interest for us is the one I am going to speak about. Condorcet played a considerable part in the public life of France of his time. He was a strong supporter of the Revolution but fell foul of the Jacobins and had to go into hiding. When he emerged from it he was arrested; and he was found dead in his cell on the following morning; it is uncertain whether it was suicide. He was a pupil of Turgot, an 'homme éclairé'; and he supported all the liberal programmes of his time and was a believer in the perfectibility of man. He was especially hostile to religion, and to priests; he would go into a frenzy about them - ignorant, hypocritical, greedy, corrupt, depraved.

Now we come to the Esquisse. There are different versions of this book. I have used that edited by O. H. Prior. In commenting on it, I would like it to be kept in mind that it was written with speed and in the difficult circumstances of his concealment. It is typical of 18th century writers about social institutions; and especially significant for us in that it was a lamp that guided Comte through the dark. All peoples about whom we know Condorcet tells us, fall somewhere between our present degree of civilization and what we are told about savage tribes. There is a chain which leads from the first peoples known to us and the present nations of Europe. For the earliest period we have to rely on what travellers tell us. There has in fact to be a good measure of conjecture about the cultural steps which mankind took towards a higher state, so we must make theoretical observations of a logical and deductive sort; bearing in mind that the great difference between man and other animals, who are in many respects like him, living in a regular and continuous society, is that man has culture (language especially, also some morality and social order). After this we have historical, documentary, sources. But we have to combine the histories of different peoples to get a general view of the progress of mankind as a whole. So, in the Esquisse he presents to us, in the 18th century manner, a sketch or plan for a universal history, less of events or about individuals, though a few names are scattered here and there, than of the development of ideas and institutions from the beginnings of human society to the French Revolution. It is a history of thought, and he engages in it by a classification of the social and cultural stages, or states, through which man has passed in his progress (and emphasis should be put on that word). But if the form is historical the content is sociological.

Condorcet, like many of his contemporary writers, was much impressed, as indeed he had a right to be, by the progress of physics, brought about by mathematics; and he advocated the use of quantitative methods in the study of social facts. There was to be a new science, 'la mathématique sociale'. He thought that knowledge of what he believed to be the laws of history would give us the keys to the future. His outlook was I suppose what some people might call more scientific than that of most of the social

philosophers of his time; and he certainly had a good understanding of scientific methods and techniques.

But let us pursue the book. In the first stage, men are united into peoples - small societies of families subsisting by hunting and fishing and with only a simple, crude technology and what he called science, but with language and some moral ideas. Custom had the place of law and there was embryonic government. There was little time for reflection and there was little division of labour. Men at this stage were already corrupted by superstition - he is off on his old horse again - and those with a rudimentary knowledge of arts and religion became leaders. These were the first priests, or clarlatans or sorcerers. Like most writers of the time Condorcet speculated on the origins of class and government.

The second stage is from pastoralism to agriculture. Pastoralism gave a more abundant and assured food supply and hence greater leisure. So there followed an increase in knowledge and the arts, and also differences in wealth and the employment of labour and slavery (the labour of a man was now worth more than the keeping of him). Also, the greater variety of things used and their unequal distribution produced commerce, which necessitated currency. Increase in the means of life led to increase of population, which in turn led to greater complexity in social life. Some peoples have remained in this stage owing to climate, habit, love of independence, conservatism, laziness, or superstition.

We may here pause to make some comments. (1) He gives no examples of societies in these stages. (2) His classification of social types is on criteria of production and productive relations. (3) He demonstrates logically, if not empirically (or thinks that he does) how certain changes in social institutions inevitably follow changes in modes of production. (4) He gives, as did others of his time, chief place in social evolution to property, from which follow leisure, government, commerce, currency, etc.

The third stage is from the beginnings of agriculture to the invention of alphabetic script - to Condorcet a most important invention, for it more or less rendered, especially when printing was later invented, what he called superstition impossible. Agriculture attached men to the soil and hence there was greater stability and continuity in social life. Ownership became more distinct, as did capital also, in that the yield of cultivation gave a surplus. Division of labour now took place and specialised crafts and economic functions resulted. Commerce was also extended and there was a general cultural development. To the three classes that we can already distinguish in pastoral societies - owners, domestics attached to them, and slaves - we have now to add labourers of all kinds, and merchants, and as new institutions arose or old ones developed, there was need for more extensive legislation; and all sorts of other progressive changes began to creep in at this stage, e.g. in the manner of educating children, in the relation between the sexes, and in political institutions. The power of leading families increased and their excesses and extortions brought about revolutions and the establishment of republics or tyrannies. An agricultural people who had been conquered could not abandon their land but had to work it for their

masters, so we get various forms of domination. He makes another sound observation when he says that communication between peoples much accelerated their progress through cultural borrowing; and, though war and conquest may ultimately lead to cultural decline, they at first often bring about expansion of the arts and serve to improve them. Arts and sciences made slow progress, the progress being due to certain families and castes having made them the foundation of their power to exploit the common people (like St. Simon and Comte, Condorcet recognised the value at a certain time of what he disapproved of, and was later to be inappropriate and become decadent). The other stages are historical ones and Condorcet abandons speculation at this point. He describes the main phases of the history of thought in Europe. They are: stage IV, the progress of human thought in Greece to the division of the sciences about the time of Alexander; stage V, progress of the sciences from their division to their decadence (the period of Aristotle) - the decadence was due, as Gibbon also informs us, to Christianity, which was hostile to all spirit of inquiry, and to the Barbarians; stage VI, the decadence of enlightenment ('lumières') to their restoration about the time of the crusades; stage VII, the first progress of the sciences after their restoration in the west to the invention of printing, which finally made the persistence of superstition impossible, scepticism being spread too far and wide; stage VIII, from the invention of printing to the time when science and philosophy broke the back of authority; stage IX, from Descartes to the formation of the French Republic; stage X, a vision of the future progress of the human mind ('esprit').

There is no need to discuss his comments on these historical changes in detail. We may note, however, that he showed acumen in his selection of them and also in the sociological features he considered to be most significant of each, e.g. much progress was made in Greece because there the priests had no monopoly of learning; the crusades were favourable to liberty in that they weakened and impoverished the nobles and extended the contacts of European peoples with the Arabs which had already been formed in Spain and through the commerce of Pisa, Genoa and Venice; the invention of printing led to a strong and free public opinion which could not be stifled; the fall of Constantinople to the Turks brought the original writings of Aristotle and Plato to the scholars of Europe; the discovery of America had, among other consequences, the advantage that it was then possible to study many new and different types of society (he did not mention particular primitive societies but it is evident that he had read what had been written about them in his day); the use of vernacular languages in the place of Latin in all branches of philosophy and science rendered them easier for the common people to master but made them more difficult for the savant to follow their general advance.

A few concluding observations may be in place. (1) I would say that Condorcet was primarily a polemical writer and a social reformer who stood up to privilege and exploitation wherever he found them. He talked much about science but as a student of cultural history he was not, I think we may say, a very deep scholar - what he wrote about the Middle Ages displayed bias and left much to be desired in scholarship. Nevertheless, he is rightly regarded as a precursor of sociology and social anthropology in that he was speaking of social institutions and the history of thought rather than of political events in the narrow sense, or of persons, and in a scientific, comparative way. He held that 'The sole foundation of belief in the natural sciences is this idea, that the general

laws, known or not known, which rule the phenomena of the universe, are necessary and constant; and for what reason would this sentiment be less true for the development of the intellectual and moral faculties of man, than for the other operations of nature? (p.203). Like his contemporaries he saw these laws as laws of cultural and concomitant social development or progress, and an essential feature of culture is that, in spite of backslidings, it is cumulative - a boy leaving school today knows more of mathematics than Newton knew. The laws have therefore to be formulated in terms of stages ('époques') in each of which various social changes give rise to new needs ('besoins') which in their turn bring about further changes. And though these changes may be associated in our minds with individuals, who may even give their names to an epoch, great social changes make them and not they the changes. Descartes was an important figure no doubt but his importance is in his being a sign and product of, and a link in, a great movement in the history of thought - a way of looking at things akin to that of the Marxists. When Condorcet talks about the invention of printing he does not tell us its date or who the inventor was, for the only interest it has for him is that it was the culmination of social changes in one epoch and the cause of social changes in the next. And all this meant, to him at least, that a general theory could be formulated and furthermore that the history of any particular people could only be understood in the light of such theoretical knowledge based on universal history.

(2) The study of social facts must be by observation of actual relations. The religion of books is not the same as that of the people. Law and its execution are quite different things. So are the principles of government and its actualities. So is any institution as imagined by its creators and how it works in practice. He here foreshadows social surveys and fieldwork.

(3) Social facts must be studied in relation to each other as functioning parts of a total social system ('système social') - e.g. the progress of science in any country depends on natural circumstances, political and social conditions, forms of religion and government, economic circumstances, etc. All parts of a social system are interdependent and necessarily so.

(4) Condorcet was a great believer in applied social science ('art social'), which will derive from a theoretical science of society. 'In the same way as the mathematical and physical sciences serve to make perfect the arts employed for our most elementary needs, is it not equally in the necessary order of nature that the progress of the moral and political sciences should exercise the same action on the motives which control our sentiments and our actions?' (p. 227) In other words, greater knowledge invariably and inevitably leads to the cumulative amelioration of mankind. Perhaps he was over-optimistic; but his star 'brille encore. Elle brillera toujours.'

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