

H-France Review Vol. 13 (May 2013), No. 69

Condorcet. *Political Writings*. Steven Lukes and Nadia Urbinati, eds. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xlv + 209 pp. Editors' introduction, notes, bibliography, notes for further reading and index. \$85.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-107-02101-3. \$30.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-107-60539-8.

Review by Robert H. Blackman, Hampden-Sydney College.

Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (often called in English the "Sketch") is one of the most important works coming out of the Enlightenment, as important and influential as Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" but seldom assigned (or, more to the point read) in its entirety. Like Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, it is a long and somewhat difficult work. Because it evokes a world much different from our own, the modern undergraduate requires a bit of help to comprehend it. Thus, it is with great pleasure that we can welcome the publication of Condorcet's *Political Writings* in the Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought. This series provides textbooks for students of political theory and includes the scholarly apparatus necessary for students to approach difficult works.

This edition of Condorcet's political writing succeeds in meeting this goal, though a few minor changes could be made that would make it even more useful. The editors, Steven Lukes of New York University and Nadia Urbinati of Columbia University, have chosen to complement the *Sketch* with six shorter pieces intended to expand on themes Condorcet introduced in it. Each piece is aptly chosen. The relatively well-known "Rules of the Society of the Friends of the Negroes," "On giving women the right of citizenship" and "Advice to his daughter" are joined by three short pieces culled from Condorcet's notes that enable the reader to understand underlying themes in the *Sketch*: "Thoughts on Despotism," "On the meaning of the words 'freedom,' 'free,' 'a free man,' 'a free people'" and "On the meaning of the word 'revolutionary'." While the star of the show is the *Sketch* (appearing in a translation from 1955, though amended), the supporting cast here is worth the price of admission.

As the editors write, "The *Esquisse* is the most influential and arguably the most powerful formulation of the idea of progress—an idea more secular than 'providence,' more voluntaristic than 'evolution' and more far-reaching than 'development.' In a nutshell, that idea is that, given economic growth (due to commerce), progress, in its various forms, linked by an unbreakable chain, proceeds intermittently but indefinitely into the future" (p. xl). But the editors wish to do more than show Condorcet's importance as a theorist of progress. They seek to demonstrate that Condorcet's theory of progress was impossible without what they call his "democratic theory of liberty" (p. xl). It is in the interest of exploring this democratic theory of liberty that they have included the additional works. Each is meant to explore a specific area. As the editors note, "In setting out his hopes for a more decent world, Condorcet sought unceasingly to work out how his goals—of greater equality between men and women, the promotion of freedom and the overcoming of despotism—could be realized..." (p. xl).

The editors have written a useful and brief introduction to the texts, giving the reader a brief biography of Condorcet as well as a clear statement of the basic themes to be found in the *Sketch* and the shorter pieces. As the editors note, the *Sketch* itself is broken into three parts, showing how humanity has

progressed from applied reason (telling the story of primitive society in the First through Third Epochs) to speculative reason (beginning with the ancient Greeks in the Fourth Epoch and running to the Enlightenment in the Ninth Epoch) to arrive finally at an era of indefinite and accelerated progress, the Tenth Epoch. This Tenth Epoch of humanity includes the era of the American and French Revolutions. Interestingly, Condorcet's conception of this last epoch came only during his time in hiding, under a sentence of death during the Terror.

The editors spend a fair amount of time explaining what they mean by Condorcet's "democratic theory of liberty," intending to refute claims that Condorcet's ideas were in any way proto-totalitarian.[1] They ably link Condorcet's ideas on slavery to his thoughts on the equality of the sexes as part of a coherent theory of emancipation, and they discuss how his theory of emancipation arises from his understanding of despotism. They attribute to Condorcet innovations that allowed him to "enrich and modify" the "classical definition of a master-slave relation... to make it a tool for detecting forms of domination in modern democratic societies" (p. xxix). They further discuss how Condorcet's involvement in the Revolution led him to work through the problem of how the rule of law could function in difficult circumstances, especially a time when the legislators were trying to found a constitution (pp. xxiv-xxvii). They conclude their introduction with a brief discussion of the reception of Condorcet's work, noting the influence Condorcet had on Henri de Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte (and alluding to his influence on Carl Schmitt) while also noting that Saint-Simon and Comte accepted Condorcet's notion of progress while rejecting his "voluntaristic belief in the capacity of individuals to choose intelligently and shape their collective futures..." (p. xxxviii).

Keith Michael Baker has written that "the heightened vision of progress represented by the Tenth Epoch... 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." [2] It is worth noting Baker's evocation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, as it gives us a very useful place from which we can view Condorcet's position in our time. Like Boethius, Condorcet was a failed politician who faced execution and like Boethius, Condorcet refused to despair. Both wrote important works—Boethius while in prison awaiting his death and Condorcet while in hiding under a sentence of death. Both sought to understand a world in which a man so clearly on the side of right and virtue could fall from favor and face death. In a sense, both can be considered to have constructed a theodicy. In Condorcet's case it is a very special kind of theodicy, though, as one of the major points of the *Sketch* is that man has to free himself from the tyranny of the priest. Providence flows from no God. Rather, Condorcet shows how one can see that progress is natural and inevitable without the need to invoke divine causes. As an empiricist, Condorcet did not need to know *why* the world works the way it does in order to show how it *does* work. And this was Condorcet's consolation. The story of humanity was for him the story of progress, and regardless of his own condition or fate, he was certain that he was on the right side of history. This is the consolation that the *Sketch* offers, and it is one worth remembering and engaging much as medieval and early modern thinkers engaged with Boethius's work.

The volume is not without minor flaws. Given Condorcet's insistence on the importance of public education in forming an electorate capable of enlightened self-rule, one might have liked to see some focus on Condorcet's efforts during the Legislative Assembly and the National Constituent Convention to reform public education.[3] Likewise, the explanatory notes in the texts themselves are too few, though some of those present are quite excellent. It would be nice to see more footnotes in a second edition explaining obscure historical references in the texts. For example, the *Sketch* itself has not one annotation, despite the parade of historical figures and events that it contains. In contrast, the essay "On the Emancipation of Women" is a model for how such annotations ought to be done. One could also ask for brief introductory remarks at the head of each essay. But these are mere quibbles about an excellent collection. One can profitably refer here to Condorcet's advice to his daughter, "Before judging someone harshly, before becoming irritated by his defects or reacting violently against what he has just said or

done, consult justice. Do not be afraid to think over your own mistakes; question your reason and listen above all to the natural goodness which you are certain to find at the bottom of your heart—for if you do not find it there, all this advice would be useless; my experience and my tenderness could do nothing for your happiness” (p. 202). We could do worse than to follow his advice.

Essays included: “The Sketch”; “Rules of the Society of the Friends of the Negroes” (1788); “On giving women the right of citizenship” (1790); “Thoughts on Despotism” (1789); “On the meaning of the words ‘freedom’, ‘free’, ‘a free man’, ‘a free people’” (1793-94); “On the meaning of the word ‘revolutionary’” (1793); and “Advice to his daughter” (written in hiding, 1794). The ancillary materials include a list of Condorcet’s published works (in French only), a timeline including the main events in Condorcet’s life, notes on the texts and translations, the editors’ introduction and suggestions for further reading.

NOTES

[1] The authors cite Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), as containing the argument that Condorcet’s thought was proto-totalitarian, and Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), as definitively refuting that argument (p. xl).

[2] Keith Michael Baker, “On Condorcet’s ‘Sketch,’” *Daedalus* 113, No. 3 (Summer 2004), p. 61.

[3] Lukes and Urbinati themselves write, “The role of education in Condorcet’s social philosophy of progress and equality may be the best place to seek his own answer to Berlin’s critique” (p. xxvi).

Robert H. Blackman
Hampden-Sydney College
rblackman@hsc.edu

Copyright © 2013 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172