

SECURITY

Condorcet's Bottom Up Federalism

by Eric Schliesser

Condorcet's posthumously published (1794) *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind* [(French: *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (hereafter: *Outlines*)) was written while the author was in hiding from the Jacobin terror. Despite these circumstances the book sketches an optimistic future of near limitless open-ended progress in the sciences, in technology, in education, in economic growth, and moral improvement. It's the first major intellectual work that thinks through the politics of mass society without a hint of relying on the stewardship of heroic or wise individuals.

Sandrine Bergès has shown⁶¹ that there is considerable evidence that Condorcet's talented spouse, Sophie Grouchy (1764-1822), contributed to the composition of at least some passages of the

⁶¹ Bergès (2018), *Journal of the History of Ideas* 79.2 "[Family, Gender, and Progress: Sophie de Grouchy and Her Exclusion in the Publication of Condorcet's Sketch of Human Progress](#)," pp. 267-283

first edition of the *Outlines*. But in what follows I follow convention and refer to Condorcet as the author of *Outlines*.

Condorcet's vision combines robust defenses of free markets, property rights, abolition of slavery, equal rights for men and women, free trade, democratic majoritarianism alongside general religious freedom, freedom of thought, mass education, and disestablishment of religion. In addition, it includes the first articulation of a mathematically grounded social insurance model of the welfare state; Condorcet (1743-1794) thinks this can be pursued through voluntary mutual associations or coordinated by the government.

Much of his vision has become commonplace since. From a contemporary perspective, progressives, deliberative democrats, liberals, and classical liberals can all make Condorcet's *Outlines* an important inspiration to their projects (and often do). Condorcet's work on the application of mathematics to democratic theory has created an ongoing research area. Unsurprisingly, then, Condorcet, who was also a civil servant and politician, praises Rousseau, Locke, and Adam

Smith without suggesting there is a need to choose among them.

I don't mean to suggest there are no troubling features to his thought. For, despite his very strong defense of sex equality his writings are shaped by a strain of sexism about women's intellectual capacities. As Louis Sala-Molins's *Dark Side of the Light: Slavery and the French Enlightenment* documents, not unlike J.S. Mill, Condorcet, when confronted by the political and financial power of slaveholding interests, proposes means of abolitionism that would end up putting more money in the hands of slavers. (Condorcet himself did not benefit financially from slavery.) Sala-Molins shows that in addition to his views on property rights, Condorcet's gradualism in abolitionism is rooted in his economic and anthropological views (again anticipating Mill) on perfectibility that Africans supposedly need time and education to be ready for full liberty. And as I have suggested elsewhere lurking in Condorcet's thought is a more general embrace of civilizational superiority.⁶²

⁶² Schliesser, Eric (2024). "[Condorcet on Civilizational Progress, and its limits.](#)" *Digressions & Impressions*.

In what follows, I highlight a strain of his argument that has received little attention and that also involves important unfinished business for humanity. After an introduction, *Outlines* is divided in ten chapters each called an ‘epoch.’ The use of ‘epoch’ hints at the fact that Condorcet inscribes his narrative into a stadial theory of human development very similar to what we find in Hume, Smith, and Condorcet’s older mentor Turgot. But unlike them, he then subdivides known history into further more fine-grained periods in which he can describe important (or highlights of the interactions among) technological, intellectual, political, economic, and religious developments. This makes it sound rather dry, but the book is peppered with polemics against the Church and various kinds of political despotism; there is a real warmth in the service of freedom.

Early in the book, in the third chapter/epoch, which is devoted to the transition from an agricultural stage to the first development of sedentary societies that develop a key civilizational instrument, the alphabet, and with the division of labor create great diversity of forms of political life. Condorcet quietly introduces an important theme:

Nations who acknowledged a common origin, who spoke the same language, without abjuring war with each other, entered almost universally into a confederacy more or less close, and agreed to unite themselves, either against foreign enemies, or mutually to avenge their wrongs, or to discharge in common some religious duty.⁶³

The original, anonymous translator uses ‘confederacy’ where Condorcet’s [French original](#) [has](#) *fédération*. This is a wise choice of translation because Condorcet clearly allows that the political integration he is describing is only partial; the member polities are still capable of making war against each other.

Even so, the moment is significant because Condorcet is not just describing the origins of defensive alliances (say like NATO today), and the origins of international law (‘avenging wrongs’), but also a form of integration by way of common religion, building on shared language or what we would now call nationhood (‘common origin’). In

⁶³ Condorcet, *Origins*. “Progress of Mankind from the Agricultural State to the Invention of Alphabetical Writing” [pp. 44-45](#)

fact, it is pretty clear that Condorcet is inspired here by Socrates' vision for a kind of Hellenistic defensive confederation described by Plato (cf. *Republic* 470-1 & 427), and projects it on to the third 'epoch.'

Crucially, this structure also involves the possibility to create permanent ties among different tribes and cities. That is, rather than accepting the permanent state of war so characteristic of the Hobbesian state of nature, Condorcet is pointing to the possibility of permanent amiability and freedom among nations (like, say, Canada and the US today). The implied contrast is with the "confederacy of tyrants"⁶⁴ (*ligue de tyrans*) that always seeks to advance despotism (as Condorcet describes in the ninth chapter/epoch.)

In the famous, final chapter/epoch, 'the future progress of mankind,' Condorcet culminates his argument on the scourge of war that he – not unlike Adam Smith — associates with mercantilism, the spirit of monopoly, and imperialism. Condorcet rejects the plans for 'perpetual peace' that were common during the eighteenth century (proposed by William Penn and Abbé de Saint-Pierre). These all

⁶⁴ Condorcet, *Outlines* [pp. 244-245](#)

required the efforts of kings and leaders to impose peace, as it were, ‘top down’ against their own self-interest. For Condorcet recognized that (the threat of) war could be lucrative to leaders and also served as a means to justify and legitimize their rule.

By contrast, Condorcet proposes a bottom up process toward political integration and what he calls “permanent confederations”⁶⁵ that is a species of what we could call ‘federalism.’ In the bottom up process, states first need to protect property and free trade. This will change the interests and morals of people such that they prefer “security” against the lure of “mercantile interest” and “power.”⁶⁶ Within such federations composed of commercial republics states would have no reason to fear each other.

Here Condorcet anticipates the much more detailed and more familiar argument of Kant in *Perpetual Peace* (1795). And both Condorcet and Kant are quite clearly inspired by, as I have argued, the immense federal vision sketched by Smith at

⁶⁵ Condorcet, *Outlines* [pp. 244-245](#)

⁶⁶ Condorcet, *Outlines* [p. 282](#)

the end of *Wealth of Nations*.⁶⁷ Condorcet is, thus, the harbinger of what in (1815) his *Principles of Politics*, Benjamin Constant called the ‘new federalism’ in which federally constituted components combine as federal states.⁶⁸ Adopting Machiavelli’s arguments about the utility of immigration to his own ends, Condorcet assumes that such federated commercial republics will be open to migrants from other countries not just from the spirit of hospitality, but also because it combines with their self-interest.

While Condorcet’s pure majoritarianism will always sit uncomfortably with liberal sensibilities, his efforts to combine the demands of morality with action-guiding enlightened self-interest is characteristic of liberalism’s genius. Thus, Condorcet anticipates the federalism of Hayek and the EU. When people feel secure and mingle in this way, Condorcet expects it “will accelerate the progress of this fraternity of nations; and wars, like assassinations, will be ranked in the number of

⁶⁷ Schliesser “[Federalism and The unity of Early Liberalism: Bentham and Kant’s reception of Adam Smith’s ‘New Imperialism’](#)”

⁶⁸ [Levy 2007](#)

those daring atrocities, humiliating and loathsome to nature.”⁶⁹

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⁶⁹ Condorcet, [Outlines pp. 282-283](#)