

# CONDORCET

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## Part 1 – The last Encyclopaedist, defender and heir to the "philosophers"

A brilliant mathematician, Condorcet shares the ambition that animated the Encyclopaedists, to put knowledge at the service of society and the happiness of men. A disciple of Voltaire, D'Alembert and the economist Turgot, the Marquis de Condorcet represented the liberal elite of the Ancient Regime who played an active role in the Revolution, trying to bring and apply the ideas of the Enlightenment to it. His triple career as an academic, bureaucrat and politician testifies to this.

First of all, the Marquis de Condorcet extends the work of the philosophers, of whom he is, in Michelet's eyes, the last heir and defender. Mathematician like D'Alembert, he was his natural disciple right from his admission to the Academy of Sciences in 1769. But he also shared Voltaire's last legal battles to which he quickly became attached, the case of La Barre d'Étalondes in 1774. And this earned him the nickname "enraged sheep". Finally, his third spiritual father was the economist Turgot, whom he assisted in his brief ministry from 1774 to 1776. He is also the last of the Encyclopaedists.

Condorcet assists D'Alembert with the mathematical articles he writes for the *Supplement* to the Encyclopaedia, published by Panckoucke. Then, in 1781, he managed the *Encyclopédie méthodique* alone. He also organises the Kehl edition of Voltaire's *Complete Works*. Thus, his brilliant but unprofitable career reflected the triumph of the philosophers' party on the eve of the Revolution.

Indeed, as perpetual secretary of the Academy of Sciences since 1776, he was elected to the French Academy in 1782 and his reception speech is a vibrant manifesto of the Enlightenment. In it, he pays tribute to the late D'Alembert and Turgot, echoing the idea dear to the former of an indefinite advance in knowledge and the application of the exact sciences to the new sciences, an idea of the latter. Like his spiritual fathers, he intends to put knowledge at the service of public happiness in all fields; judicial, administrative and even political.

## Part 2 - Science for the public good and the defence of human rights: towards equality and the republic

From the philosopher depicted by Dumarsais, Condorcet shares the ardent concern of contributing to the happiness of men, first a material happiness. His administrative career as a coin inspector with Turgot led him to create a commission to develop canals, hydraulic science or to work in 1775 on the unification of weights and measures, a reform that would lead to the Constituent Assembly. As we can see, the academician does not stay in his office. But his name also remains associated with the introduction of the probability calculation in social life.

He thus founded human science as an applied science and went far beyond Turgot's reformist views by applying it to the right to vote. It is also the probabilities that lead him to vote against the death

penalty because of the risk of error associated with any judgement. Finally, he goes further than the philosophers of the Enlightenment, the defence of human rights, by claiming equal rights for slaves, Jews and women. He thus presided over the "Friends of the Blacks" society, created in Paris in 1787, and signed a pamphlet under the meaningful pseudonym Joachim Schwarz.

Finally, in politics, when the king's flight to Varennes on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1791 compromised the constitutional monarchy, the example of America encouraged him to take the step towards the idea of a republic. And to advance it in public opinion, he created a company and a newspaper in July 1791. A member of the first elected Assembly, the Legislative Assembly, in October 1792, he worked diligently on three committees: The Committee on the Drafting of the Constitution, the Committee on Public Education and the Committee on Weights and Measures. A poor speaker, this "intellectual in politics", as Elisabeth Badinter calls him, tirelessly uses his pen as a parliamentary columnist and pamphleteer. He is aware of the role played by the press and public opinion.

But his works will be buried in the shift of the Revolution towards the Terror. He was opposed to the coup de force against the Assembly on the 31st May and 2nd June 1793, which marked the fall of the Girondins, and he was quickly outlawed and died in prison on 29th March 1794. Such political commitment can surprise a scholar. But it is explained by its radical rationalism.

## Part 3 - A radical rationalism: the indefinite perfectibility of man

Indeed, what differentiates him from the other philosophers of the Enlightenment is an absolute faith in reason, the law of history. For him, misfortune is first and foremost the effect of prejudice, intolerance and superstition. But unlike D'Alembert or Voltaire, he believes that men will be able to do without religion when they are educated and where Rousseau had defined man by an ambivalent perfectibility, he thinks of him as indefinite and positive. The mission of the scholar and the philosopher follows from this. It intends to stimulate scientific research from the 70s onwards by coordinating the academies. Then he drew up a public education plan that would inspire the school of the Third Republic.

Indeed, in addition to the idea of free education, secularism, he is also responsible for the idea of basic knowledge that will enable all people to really exercise their rights and this will not be a low-cost form of knowledge. His observation is socially daring. "Nowhere, he writes, is the domestic citizen, worker, farmer, of a very rich citizen, his equal. Two classes of citizens are therefore established wherever there are very poor and very rich people, and republican equality cannot be established in a country where civil laws, finance laws and trade laws make it possible for great fortunes to last for a long time."

His unflinching confidence in the progress of reason is expressed in the book *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, written during his five months of clandestinity just before his death. He proclaims: "The time will therefore come when the sun will shine only on free men who know no other master but their reason".

## Part 4 - The Next Generation: Ideologists

The next generation of ideologues, whom Condorcet met in Madame Helvétius' salon, took over after the Revolution; Volney, Daunou, Destutt, Ginguéné and Cabanis, Condorcet's brother-in-law. Materialists like their elder, they share with him republican ideas and the ambition to develop a science of man that will enable society to be transformed.

Its foundation will be the science of ideas which will give its name to the ideology that Destutt proposes to create in his *Mémoires sur la faculté de penser* in 1796. In line with Condillac, it explains

the mechanisms by which sensory experiences are transformed into thought and combined into an ever-increasing logic. From 1794 onwards, they will express themselves in a newspaper, *La Décade*, and in the cultural institutions they have helped to create and run, first the Ecole normale and then the Institute.

Their scope of action is threefold. Epistemology with Garat and Destutt de Tracy, medicine and alienism with Cabanis, Esquirol or Pinel and anthropology illustrated by Volney. The Société des observateurs de l'homme, created in 1800, as we also call the ambitious trips of the geographer and naturalist to continue this study.

Ideologues are first protected by the Empire and they multiply reform projects in all fields. But they took refuge in a silent opposition as soon as Christianity returned after the Concordat of 1801. Thus, Condorcet and then the ideologues shared the Enlightenment's ambition to put the progress of knowledge at the service of the transformation of society for the happiness of men.