

Whereabouts of the Spirit: The Philosophy of History as a Guide to Modernity in Condorcet

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ABSTRACT: Jean Antoine Nicolas Caritat - Marquis de Condorcet - was born in France in 1743 and died in 1794. A frontier figure between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, he is considered the last of the encyclopedists. He was a pioneer of Social Mathematics. Condorcet, throughout his work - on Philosophy of History, on Politics, and on Public Instruction - foresees the possibility of apprehending human nature through mathematical analysis. He was a member of the French Academy of Sciences. During the French Revolution, while a deputy, he chaired the Committee of Public Instruction. In politics, he defended the right of everyone - boys and girls - to education, women's rights, and black rights. Condorcet conceived political action as an exact science, capable of structuring itself through predictive character. For him, history was governed by social laws that ensured a constant improvement of the rational spirit, which favored a constant progress of the sciences and arts. This paper will discuss Condorcet's posthumous work, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, published in 1795. The way in which the author refers to the historical experience of antiquity, especially to the great figures of Greece and Rome, and confronts this western world with the figures of the barbarians and the Arabs, will be discussed. Finally, it will focus on the appropriation of this ancient heritage by both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. From the methodological point of view, textual analysis will be used, as well as a comparison between the sources and the existing bibliography on the subject.

RESUMO: Jean Antoine Nicolas Caritat – Marquês de Condorcet – nasceu na França em 1743 e faleceu em 1794. Figura de fronteira entre o Iluminismo e a Revolução Francesa, é considerado o último dos enciclopedistas. Foi pioneiro da Matemática Social. Condorcet, em toda sua obra – sobre Filosofia da História, sobre Política e sobre Instrução Pública – prevê a possibilidade de se apreender a natureza humana pela análise matemática. Integrou a Academia de Ciências da França. Durante a Revolução Francesa, enquanto deputado, presidiu o Comitê de Instrução Pública. Na política defendeu o direito de todos – meninos e meninas - à instrução, o direito das mulheres e o direito dos negros. Condorcet concebia a ação política como ciência exata, capaz de se estruturar mediante caráter preditivo. Para ele, a História era regida por leis sociais, que asseguravam um constante aperfeiçoamento do espírito racional, o qual favorecia um progresso constante das ciências e das artes. Este trabalho abordará a obra póstuma de

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Condorcet, *Esboço de um quadro histórico dos progressos do espírito humano*, publicada em 1795. Será abordada a maneira pela qual o autor se remete à experiência histórica da Antiguidade, especialmente aos grandes personagens da Grécia e de Roma, confrontando esse mundo ocidental com as figuras dos bárbaros e dos árabes. Finalmente debruçar-se-á sobre a apropriação dessa herança antiga por parte tanto da Idade Média quanto do Renascimento. Do ponto de vista metodológico, recorrer-se-á à análise textual, bem como ao confronto entre as fontes e a bibliografia já existente acerca do assunto.

Jean Antoine Nicolas Caritat - Marquis de Condorcet - was born in France in 1743 and died in 1794. A frontier figure between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, he is considered the last of the encyclopedists. He was a pioneer of Social Mathematics. Condorcet, throughout his work - on Philosophy of History, on Politics, and on Public Education - foresees the possibility of apprehending human nature through mathematical analysis. He was a member of the French Academy of Sciences. During the French Revolution, while a deputy, he chaired the Committee of Public Instruction. In politics, he defended the right of everyone - boys and girls - to education, women's rights, and black rights. Condorcet conceived political action as an exact science, capable of structuring itself through predictive character. For him, history was governed by social laws that ensured a constant improvement of the rational spirit, which favored a constant progress of the sciences and arts. This paper will discuss Condorcet's posthumous work, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, published in 1795. The way in which the author refers to the historical experience of antiquity, especially to the great figures of Greece and Rome, and confronts this western world with the figures of the barbarians and the Arabs, will be discussed. Finally, it will focus on the appropriation of this ancient heritage by both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. From the methodological point of view, textual analysis will be used, as well as a comparison between the sources and the existing bibliography on the subject.

The perspective of the Philosophy of History constitutes one of the marks of ethnocentrism. In fact, the ways in which philosophical interpretations of Western History were constituted configured a given invention of traditions. The articulation between the different periods of History is presented as a necessity; and, more than that, as an inevitability of the times. Therefore, it is as if the past was contained in the future and the future announced the realization of that seed already inscribed in what has passed. Behavior patterns and cultural content are imprinted in an intentional construction of a logic of the future, which makes the trajectory of the West the only possible history to be traced. It is as if all peoples if they intend to develop, had to

follow the path traced by the western peoples. The idea of culture, as a matrix concept, is articulated with multiple forms of human life in society, specifically with the fracture between what is understood as high culture or erudite culture and a more popular perspective, of a cultural territory produced by life practices, registered as know-how. In the first case, the meaning of erudite culture is basically confused with the achievements of typography and with the setting of literate societies.

Starting with Greece the story he intends to report, Condorcet says that it was from Greece that alphabetic writing was known. This coming of writing is pointed out as a milestone that links previous history to the 18th century, through an uninterrupted sequence of facts and observations. In the light of this chain of intertwined histories, the march of progress of the human spirit would correspond to a teleology, through which the progression of history would also constitute the progression of truth and reason. It is recognized that the Greeks received from the Eastern peoples a portion of their knowledge, as well as the use of alphabetic writing and their religious system. Therefore, the Greeks would have known how to mobilize from other peoples what they brought as promising. But some aspects of Greek identity were invented right there, in Greece itself. First, the sharing of knowledge of the truth by all men: “everyone could seek to discover it in order to communicate it to everyone, to communicate it in its entirety. This fortunate circumstance, even more than political freedom, left the human spirit with independence, a guarantee of the speed and the extent of their progress” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.60). Rational knowledge contributed so that knowledge came to be understood as originating from the same and only principle as if it were a single law. This single law unfolded in various sciences and in various discoveries and achievements of knowledge. Each science was structured from an exact and precise language.

Still in relation to Greece, Condorcet comments that he emphasizes that the sect spirit existing in Greece contributed to the progress of the human spirit. The sect, on the one hand, differentiates those who belong to it from the external environment. In addition, the sect enables the recognition of internal homogeneity, which brings a common identity to the elements that make up the sect. One of the attributes of sect members came from the fact that they never wanted to have a political existence: “voluntary distance from public affairs was a precept of conduct common to almost all sects; finally to the fact that they affected to distinguish themselves from other men by their

life, as well as by their opinions” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.66). In this sense, belonging to a sect constituted, at the same time, a differentiation movement from outsiders, and for production of the same identity, for those who were inside of it. This obsession with determining identities, continuities, and causalities characterizes the version of history presented by Condorcet: a history understood as an essence that develops in an articulated form and with a unique braid, capable of producing the understanding of the past in the light of an intricate teleology, through the logic of historical inevitability.

These perspectives, the achievements of Greece unfolded the Roman achievements. The secrets of eloquence, the truths demonstrated in the art of argument, in the written configuration of laws, Rome sought to develop all this from the mastery recognized by the Romans in Greece. But, unlike Greece, Rome had as its primary authority the tradition of customs. From this, Rome built the career of jurisprudence. Condorcet goes so far as to say that “jurisprudence is the only new science that we owe to the Romans” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.85). Even so, Rome produces, similar to Greece, poetry, eloquence, history, philosophy, and science. Greece and its philosophy destroyed beliefs and deities. But Rome reverts to religious logic, given that: “Christianity soon became a powerful party, meddling in the quarrels of the Caesars, and put Constantine on the throne” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.89). The Middle Ages are considered to be a time of decadence, through which the invasion of the barbarians deprived “forever an entire country of the means of instructing itself” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.90). What is curious is that Condorcet points out that: “the sciences could have been preserved from this decadence, if the art of typography had been known” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.90). It is as if the art of typography was an inevitable artifact to be discovered by the West; as if its discovery were embryonically contained in earlier periods.

Unlike Greece, Rome did not develop the study of letters with such emphasis, since “the territory of Rome has always been a foreign soil for letters” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.92). Our own idea of the Republic derives from a way of handling words, with improvisation and subtlety, with ornaments and style in the art of declamation. Condorcet on the following subject: “the so false and so tragic idea of the decadence of the human race and the superiority of ancient times” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.93). Condorcet makes a modernizing reading of Antiquity. Antiquity is mobilized as a resource that serves to explain and justify the relevance and existence of modern times. The representation of Antiquity is here permeated by the readings, guidelines, and

urgencies of the temporality of that European 18th century. Regarding the medieval period, Condorcet considers that the human spirit, in that period, would have descended “rapidly from the height to which it had risen” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.95) and with it brought signs of cruelty, corruption and treachery. And all this because

“As soon as Christian piety descends from the altar of victory, the West has become the prey of barbarians. They embraced the new religion, but they did not adopt the language of the defeated: only the priests retained it; and, thanks to their ignorance, and their contempt for human letters, what might have been expected of enlightenment by reading the Latin books disappeared, as these books could only be read by them. The ignorance and barbaric customs of the victors are sufficiently well known: however, it was in the midst of this stupid ferocity that came the destruction of domestic slavery, which had dishonored the fair days of cultured and free Greece.” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.96)

With barbaric invasions, ignorance would prevail in the West, the Latin language would become corrupted, and institutions would perish. Even so, Condorcet assures that in anarchy the germs of future advances were seething. But, in fact, until Modernity “the authority of men had replaced the authority of reason. Books were studied much more than the nature and the opinions of the ancients, before the phenomena of the universe.” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.115). And all this would remain intact until the invention of typography. From then on “what was only read by some individuals could be read by an entire people and reach almost at the same time all men who understood the same language” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.118). New techniques for the preparation of books and new methods for reading! The invention of typography made progress in the human spirit, through the multiplication of manuscripts that culminated in multiple editions of books. In addition to the invention of the press, the Reformation would have provided advances to rationality, subjecting prejudices to the examination of reason and fundamentally providing religious and political tolerance. The diffusion of the art of typography and the consequent multiplication of books would have opened “so many doors to the truth that it had become almost impossible to close all of them; there was no longer any class or occupation to which it could be stopped” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.156).

In the 17th century with Bacon, Galileo, and Descartes, methods were created for recognizing the laws of nature and, at the same time, methods for the analytical

recognition of the truth. Condorcet, however, understands that the progress of science is measured, “in one aspect, by the number of men who know its most usual, most important truths and, on the other hand, by the number and nature of these generally known truths” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.138). Condorcet considers that the advance of knowledge should be measured, on the one hand, by the criterion of its verticality: that is, how much one deepened in the matter of knowledge. On the other hand, however, the progress of knowledge must be evaluated horizontally, that is: how many people know this? The 18th century, for politics, would be a breaking point:

“For we have reached the point of civilization where the people benefit from enlightenment, not only because of the services they receive from enlightened men but because they know how to make of them an asset and use them immediately to defend themselves from error, to prevent or satisfy their needs, to preserve themselves from the evils of life or soften them by new pleasures.” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.138)

The theme of human rights would be an element that expresses the epistemological achievements of the 18th century. It is now a question of considering that, by nature, man is a “sensitive being, capable of forming reasoning and acquiring moral ideas” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.145). Political societies are grouped from the definition of these human rights, which derive exactly from the attributes listed above. The maintenance of natural rights would be the objective of the gathering of human beings in political societies and “the social art should be that of ensuring the conservation of these rights with the most complete equality, as well as to the greatest extent” (CONDORCET, 2013, p. 145). Based on this recognition of man as a subject of rights, the idea of majority voting as a criterion for the legitimacy of democratic choice is justified. Therefore, it was the establishment of human rights that constituted the generous feeling of Humanity, which accompanies the configuration of the times of Modernity.

“The feeling of humanity, that is, that of a tender, active compassion for all the evils that afflict the human species, that of horror for everything that, in public institutions, in the acts of government, in private actions, added new pains to the inevitable pains of nature; this feeling of humanity was a natural consequence of these principles; it manifested itself in all writings, in all speeches, and its fortunate influence had already manifested itself in the laws and public institutions, even of peoples subjected to despotism.” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.157)

Condorcet sees all of this as a serene path towards a telos, towards a movement to perfect the times. The idea of perfectibility was exactly what caused the victory of truth, the triumph of reason; “and nothing could remove the enemies of reason, nor the oppressors of freedom, from a judgment that became that of all Europe” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.158). It is because of this perfectibility movement that the inevitability of a great revolution was created. Such a revolution could only be conducted in two forms: the people themselves would institute the principles of reason or the governments would interpret the opinions of the people, interpreting their will.

“One of these revolutions should be more integral and faster, but more stormy; the other, slower, more incomplete, but more tranquil: in one, freedom and happiness should be bought for passing evils; in the other, these evils were avoided, but they delayed for a long time, perhaps, the enjoyment of a part of the goods that were their infallible consequence. Corruption and ignorance of governments preferred the first mean, and the swift triumph of reason and liberty avenged the human race.” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.160)

Once the transformations brought about by the revolution were effected, in Condorcet's perspective, History would not turn back. Perfectibility ensured that the achievements that History had provided were given once and for all. For Condorcet, the superiority of the Enlightenment was only comparable to the “advantages of our trade” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.192). It was as if there was a law that, even, guided the course of future events, “the picture of the future destinies of the human species, based on the results of its history” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.189). That is: the experiences of the past ensured the framework of prediction of the future. And that future would be auspicious. “Our hopes for the future destinies of the human species can be reduced to these three questions: the destruction of the inequality between nations; the advances of equality in the same people; finally, the real improvement of man” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.190). And that would be the way, regardless of which people. Everyone should “approach the state of civilization reached by the most enlightened peoples, the freest, the most freed from prejudices, the French and the Anglo-Americans” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.190). There was a great distance between the most developed peoples and what Condorcet characterized as the servitude of the Hindus, the barbarism of the African tribes, and the ignorance of the savages. But the distance between people, with time, would disappear. This would presuppose the progress of civilization, industry, and, fundamentally, education.

“In a word, men will approach that state in which everyone will have the necessary enlightenment to conduct themselves according to their own reason in the common affairs of life, and to keep it free from prejudice, to know their rights well and exercise them according to their opinion and conscience; in which all may, by the development of their faculties, obtain secure means of providing for their needs; in which, finally, stupidity and misery will only be accidents, and not the usual state of a part of society.” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.190)

Therefore, the human species would be better for the discoveries in the sciences and the arts, for the progress in the ways of conducting itself socially, and for the ability to share this progress of the accumulated knowledge with a larger group of people. Consequently, this would presuppose a decrease in educational inequality; which would lead, therefore, to an expansion of opportunities to attend school. For Condorcet, equal education excludes dependency, making people stop being victims of prejudice and charlatanism, and obtaining effective freedom of opinion and conscience. From the decrease in the distance between the more and the less educated, “a real equality would result since the difference in enlightenment and talents can no longer raise a barrier between men who their feelings, their ideas, their language allow to understand each other” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.199). In a few words, “if the instruction is more equal, then greater equality is born” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.199-200) and everyone will be able to enjoy their common rights, making people progressively acquire more enlightenment and more development. Therefore, the question: “does not the improvement of laws, of public institutions, a consequence of the progress of these sciences, have the effect of bringing together, identifying the common interest of each man with the common interest of all?” is rhetorical (CONDORCET, 2013, p.208). Thus, there would be a two-way path that ensured, on the one hand, the progress of the sciences, and, on the other hand, the “progress in the art of educating” (CONDORCET, 2013, p.212), one mechanism influencing the other and both contributing to the improvement of the human species. There would be a network, as if it were a chain, which ensured this joint movement, which, with mathematical certainty, would ensure the progress of peoples, always with the same movement and along the same route, as if it were an unequal but combined development. This philosophy of History was the guide of Modernity and the modernization of the different countries of the West and the East. Everyone, strictly speaking, would have the same chances of making their way toward the eradication of inequalities in industry, knowledge, and education. It is, as can be seen, a great narrative, inscribed in the logic of interests of the West.

The understanding of the Eurocentric matrix that regulates a given Western sense that still presides over contemporary debates, certainly, has some tribute to the doctrine defended by Condorcet – who, in the name of a past story – intends, decidedly, to speak to the future. According to the philosopher, the knowledge of human things is liable to be subjected to accurate and exact calculations. Therefore, history is thought of as a source of understanding the present and as a strategy for predicting the future. From the application of calculus to the different fields of natural knowledge, it will be possible to deduce rules of probability capable of governing and regulating the laws of human science, which Condorcet believed. It was about applying conceptual frameworks to social phenomena, and problem-solving schemes provided, by analogy, by the physical sciences, through data and methods.

Condorcet supposed that observation, experience, and meditation constituted the tripod that leads to the careful search for different categories of knowledge. The philosophy of history professed by Condorcet intends to intertwine the knowledge of human things with the methods of knowledge and analysis of the natural sciences. A given way of conceiving culture is supposed here, which understands itself as disseminating the achievements of human reason. A given way of judging the role of the West in the conformation of a certain image of itself is also understood here. Therefore, it will be up to the school to offer the young generations access to literate culture and knowledge accumulated over the course of generations.

However, schooling as a social project had a political effect: being a mechanism for the improvement of peoples, education directly prepares the territory of democracy. Democratic action, based on rational choice, presupposes the possibility of the autonomy of reason to choose between alternatives posed in civil life. To give meaning to the development of a democratic society will be, under this perspective, scrupulously preparing the time in which freedom would be enjoyed: hence, public education is thought herein of as a project to improve the nation-state to be reformed. One of the basic expressions of this understanding resides in Condorcet's perspective, according to which there would be a link between youth formation, the democratic exercise of citizenship, and the improvement of the theoretical ideals of democratic politics. As Gilles-Gaston Granger points out, Condorcet's ideal regarding scientific knowledge of social issues takes place “by means of a calculation of chances is a mathematical ideal” (GRANGER, 1956, p.27).

Condorcet's social science – as highlighted by Granger – presupposed a set of observable phenomena, subject to be highlighted through objectivity criteria and described qualitatively and quantitatively with some degree of reliability. It was about giving the territory of human studies – or the so-called humanities – another 'nature': directly derived from the field of the 'natural' sciences themselves. In the words of Granger: “it [this science] must schematize the data of experience in such a way that deductive reasoning can extract the necessary consequences from them” (GRANGER, 1956, p.22). For Granger, it is necessary to remember the encyclopedic character of Condorcet, both as a member of the encyclopedist movement and as a subject who studies countless domains of human knowledge, with the purpose of intertwining them with each other to better understand them. His obsession with Mathematics was, in a way, Cartesian: he sought to use it as a method to operate his thinking on the affairs of man.

Condorcet assumed that mathematical calculation would henceforth govern the logic of public life, being applied both to the field of probabilities in elections and to the calculation of successful children at different levels of schooling: “on the one hand, he postulates the extension of the scientific method of knowledge of man as such; on the other hand, he is interested in the applications of science not as a negligible sub-product, but as its most natural and most constant purpose” (GRANGER, 1956, p.16). It is worth recalling the categorical statement by Zygmunt Bauman: “geometry is the archetype of the modern mind” (BAUMAN, 1999, p.23). Progress, understood and captured by Condorcet as the guiding principle of the course of History, would open – as Maria das Graças de Souza says – “the possibility of talking about the future. This way, reflection on what man was and what he is today can lead us to the knowledge of the means to ensure and accelerate progress” (SOUZA, 2001, p.157). The same author points out that the idea of Humanity is a great achievement in the theoretical framework of Illustration. Even so, there is a clear ethnocentric dimension in the Enlightenment's pretension to point to criteria of universal values. For the author, the universalizing aspiration is misleading:

“If one cannot think of society as a homogeneous whole, much less can humankind be conceived as an abstract totality. The same could be said of the concept of civilization. A very common term in the 18th century, sometimes opposing nature, sometimes barbarism, its content encloses the idea of an economic, political, and cultural development, whose effects are manifested in terms of social and political life, but

also of private life. What can be said is that the idea of civilization is built under the prism of Western European history, and, as such, it is marked by a partiality that would prevent us from properly thinking non-European theories, and, in the case of the Enlightenment, especially those of the Far East and the cultures of America. About the enlightened idea of reason, it could be said that it excludes other forms of apprehension of the real, at the same time that it dissimulates the undeniable fact of its own historicity." (SOUZA, 2001, p. 202)

Paolo Rossi also notes that confidence and excessive optimism in History are always accompanied by the opposite – that is, by tragic or apocalyptic vision. The author says that's why

“1) that at the origin of modernity, there was a tension between hopes for extraordinary novelties and anguish of impending catastrophes; 2) that the theme of the sinking of civilizations is present, with an extraordinary force, in the thinking of the so-called great 'precursors of the idea of progress.'” (ROSSI, 2000, p.14-5)

In any case, Condorcet's optimism regarding the course of history is undisguised. Recognizing that proclaimed rights cannot be confused with rights actually enjoyed by people in societies, Condorcet understands that it was only a matter of time, until it arrives “that moment when the Sun will illuminate only free men on earth and will recognize no other master but reason; where tyrants and slaves, priests and their stupid or hypocritical instruments will no longer exist, except in history and in the theaters” (CONDORCET, 2008, p.271). Condorcet believed in human history and was confident in a framework of progress. He believed that human reason contributes to such a story unfolding satisfactorily. However, he considered it necessary to improve this rationality through the undertaking of education. Therefore, educating had become a social mission, which had to do with the future of nationality and, more than that, of Mankind. Reason, perfectible, cannot fail to be extended, expanded and shared. Perfectibility demands this...

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