

The relevance of Condorcet today.

It is always useful to look at history, and to find encouragement in the optimism of the Age of Enlightenment, even more so at a time when dark visions about the future seem to proliferate, and vested interests cling to bypassed views. People enjoy the multiple benefits of science, reason and humanism, and the continuing achievements of modernity, though they tend to forget how it was before; modern views and ways of living are rooted in the Enlightenment philosophies (“Sapere aude!” was their motto) of the 18th century and the thinkers who produced it. As Immanuel Kant said ‘Enlightenment is man’s release from self incurred tutelage’. However, it did not spread easily, because large groups remained attached to their traditional views and ways of living.

Among many Enlightenment thinkers in Europe, the Nicolas marquis of Condorcet was a unique figure who still can motivate and inspire those concerned about the Common Good.

He was a brilliant mathematician, a technocrat who believed that science and evidence were the basis of progress for humankind and he worked on matters as diverse as hydrodynamic calculations for the canal system or the reform of the French weights and measurements.

He published about history and politics and was an active member of the Paris municipal council and in 1791 he was elected to Parliament, where he made a plan for a reform of public education and was a member of the committee which wrote a new Constitution, which was a model of tolerance of diversity and of humanistic values. He wanted to reconcile various visions about the country’s future and opposed the twins of centralisation and authoritarianism.

He was an ardent defender of the equality of man and woman, which he considered simply as a natural right, in the tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and which should supersede the inequality created by social institutions. He was equally fierce opponent of injustice, of forced labour, slavery and the death penalty. He proclaimed equal rights for black and Jewish people. Overall, his publications were more innovative and inclusive than many of his peers, save perhaps Adam Smith in his writing about morality.

As so often with clairvoyant and broad minded people, he was side lined in the end by extremists and died in his prison cell. His name faded a bit until Elisabeth and Robert Badinter wrote an impressive biography.

Many of his ideas are now common place, but they have to be seen in their contextual conditions and power plays of social groups, which he perhaps did insufficiently. Progress is not a linear as he thought, but meanders through history.

The 21st century is quite different from the times of Condorcet, but some of the undercurrents show similarity. Voices concerned about the Common Good, critical of vested but views and interests, should be heard now like then in order to timely remedy the present course. Europe’s welfare and stability are not guaranteed and require constant critical examination. Modern day equivalents of Condorcet should be heard.