Introduction

In this book I have set out to examine aspects of Condorcet's political thought from 1774, the year of Louis XVI's accession, and also of the appointment of Turgot to ministerial office, to the marquis's death in 1794, two decades that would bear witness to more political and social change than had been seen before in France in any single lifetime. During these interesting times Condorcet's approach to politics gradually changed from being that of a second-generation *philosophe*, prominent mathematician and outspoken defender of human rights into that of a public servant and advocate of a ground-breaking scientific model of civil government and the social order. These were the years when Condorcet would also evolve ideologically from constitutional monarchist into theorist and practitioner of revolution and republicanism. The emergence of Condorcet as a public figure coincided with the passing of the *ancien régime* and the dawn of a modernity in Europe whose implications for 'the science of society' he understood more clearly than most.

His political life really had its beginnings in 1770 following his encounter with Voltaire at Ferney, an encounter that would draw him into Voltaire's public campaign against the injustices of the French criminal procedure fought out in the long aftermath of the notorious trial in Abbeville in 1766 of the young blasphemer, the chevalier de La Barre. However, it was not until the appointment of his close friend Turgot as Controller-General that Condorcet started to engage seriously with the art of government, a path that would soon lead him into the hurricane of revolutionary politics. From 1774 onwards he would be absorbed into the polemics and events of a fast-moving political scenario, intent on bringing his remarkable insights into probability theory and his concept of 'social mathematics' to the great project of enlightened reform and scientifically planned progress.

One of the purposes of this study is to illuminate the pragmatics of that project, and to explore the links between Condorcet's meteoric career as a theorist of political and social change and his activities as an elected

legislator in a new, and still uncertain, world. In the shadow of the guillotine in the last two years of his life, Condorcet worked tirelessly to ensure the demise of the arbitrary powers of autocratic despotism, of the authority of the priestly caste and of the inequities of the civil order as they affected the daily lives of ordinary men and women. His vision of progress in both contexts was extraordinarily rich, forward-looking and courageous. The dimensions of this stupendous vision clarify when measured not only in the context of Condorcet's sustained advocacy of the values and aspirations of the Enlightenment, and the record of his personal commitment to the welfare of his fellow citizens, but also in the context of his engagement with the world of mathematical physics and the calculus of probability. The mental landscapes of the *Essai sur l'application de l'analyse à la probabilité des décisions rendues à la pluralité des voix* and the *Tableau général de la science qui a pour objet l'application du calcul aux sciences politiques et morales* interact closely with those of the *Essai sur la constitution et les fonctions des assemblées provinciales* and many other non-mathematical political essays, including the astonishing *Fragment* of the tenth *époque* of the *Esquisse* itself.

What Condorcet called memorably 'social arithmetic' provides the intellectual platform for a wide range of treatises, draft bills, legislative proposals, press articles, committee reports and blueprints for reform relating to a broad spectrum of issues: economics, the criminal code, taxation, social insurance, electoral processes, constitutional change, emancipation and colonial reform, minority rights, contraception, education, transport and other matters relating to French national life and its infrastructure. Statistics and actuarial science start to come of age as an instrument of social planning in Condorcet's hands. In all of these varying contexts his political philosophy draws its uniqueness, and much of its coherence, from a strikingly original blend of science, visionary idealism and a hard-nosed pragmatism to which it always remained firmly anchored, though from which it has often been separated.

Condorcet lived politics as intensely as he thought politics, and this sparked off a rare synergy between the proclamation of principles and their realisation as the building blocks of a new civil order, between the conceptualisation of progress and its social, legal and political implementation. In his view only the rational, scientific management of change, as opposed to its purely philosophical elucidation, would allow the mission of the Enlightenment to have a tangible, beneficial impact on the lives of ordinary people, and on the advancement of public happiness. His views on equality, freedom, tolerance and rights, shared with many other radical political thinkers of the time, thus acquire startlingly concrete applications in a number of

contexts in which reflections on rights, equality, sovereignty, justice, economics, representation, constitutional reform, education and the political reconstruction of the citizen harden into ambitious public works initiatives, and finely detailed technicalities of complex legislation. They are given constitutional life in the minutiae of quotidian administrative modalities with which he adorned so many of his government bills and reports, not to mention his essays and treatises, and into which few contemporary political thinkers ventured with such relish. As a member of innumerable committees, boards and commissions, he demonstrated frequently how, in all these contexts, political aims and ideals could be transformed through the filter of mathematical calculation into powerful levers of decision-making, strategic planning and effective policy formulation.

Condorcet was one of the few Enlightenment thinkers to witness the Revolution and to participate fully in its constitutional aftermath. He was a close ally of Turgot, knew Tom Paine, exchanged views with the fathers of the American Revolution, collaborated closely with Siéyès, admonished Burke, defended Price, opposed Necker and crossed swords with Robespierre. He was an active member of the first *Assemblée nationale* (from 17 June 1789) and subsequently of the *Assemblée constituante* (from 9 July 1789), a member of the *Assemblée législative* (from 1 October 1791) and of the *Convention nationale* (from 21 September 1792). As president of various commissions, he presented, with varying degrees of success, numerous reports and *projets de loi*, many of which he drafted personally. He was a prolific pamphleteer and journalist, contributing regularly to journals and newspapers, and he was the official *rapporteur* of government business for the *Chronique de Paris* between November 1791 and March 1793. He took a leading role in French political life at a time of momentous dislocation. Although he was always by instinct a moderniser, more attuned to the open vistas of the future than to the closed models of the past, his ideas and initiatives were always elaborated within a framework of sustained communication with, and immersion within, the values and the traditions of the Enlightenment. He was, in short, an outstanding disciple of the Enlightenment, uniquely located at the centre of great events, political debate and constitutional and social upheaval at a seismic moment in France's history. At the same time, Condorcet's political thought represents not only a continuity but also a significant reorientation of Enlightenment ideology. He looks forward to a Golden Age to come, rather than backwards to a lost political Eden. The secular account of the Fall of Man that dominated so many contemporary interpretations of the human journey from the state of nature to the civil order recedes in Condorcet's thought before a more

positively charged, future-orientated vision of human perfectibility, and of the potential power of human energies and reason to transform the present, and lay the foundations for a better future. His understanding of the historical dynamics of progress interacted closely with an awareness of the exigencies and realities of a rapidly mutating political and social culture, to whose changing configurations he was always responsive.

A mathematician at the cutting edge of research into probability theory and its applications, an engaged social scientist and elected politician, he was above all a citizen of that highly politicised Republic of Letters of the late eighteenth century. The continuous dialogue that he conducted in his writings through time and space with other citizens of that glittering republic such as Socrates, Michel de l'Hôpital, Bacon, Galileo, Descartes, Locke, Newton, Sidney, Voltaire, d'Alembert, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Turgot, Franklin and Paine is the defining mark of his citizenship. This international, inter-century collegiality of contemporary political discourse is well reflected in the *Lettre à M*** sur la Société de 1789*. Condorcet was very much a product of what Coutel has called the age of political sociability,[1] moving easily in the public space of ideological exchange and discourse of the various clubs and salons to which he belonged, and to whose ambience as sympathetic locations for reflection he responded. Towards the end of his life he paid memorable tribute to the humane benefits of that ambience in the *Fragment sur l'Atlantide*. With Condorcet the notion of 'social science' passes indelibly into the language of modern political discourse. Yet he has never occupied a prominent place in the pantheon of great eighteenth-century political thinkers, even in France where as a theorist of democracy he has always languished in the shadow of Rousseau. Perhaps, as McLean and Hewitt have argued,[2] he is insufficiently user-friendly. It is true that only on rare occasions does his unappealing prose betray passion or strive for elegance, and his treatises, often hastily drafted and stylistically rebarbative, are by no means an easy read.

In one of his last *Fragments*, written in 1794, Condorcet predicted that he would 'perish like Socrates and Sidney' as his reward for having worked to secure French liberty (I: 608). At the end of his life he had achieved something approaching iconic status in European political circles, his contributions recognised, if not always approved of, by Burke, Demaistre, Sainte-Beuve, Malthus, Destutt de Tracy and others. However, in the two hundred years or more that have passed since the appearance in the winter

[1] C. Coutel, *Politique de Condorcet* (Paris: Payot, 1996), p. 31.
[2] I. S. McLean and F. Hewitt, *Condorcet. Foundations of Social Choice and Political Theory* (Aldershot, Brookfield: E. Elgar, 1994), p. 73.

of 1794–5 of the official press announcements of his death in the previous March, he has certainly had to wait a long time for the recognition that he deserves, and for perceptions of him as a prophet without honour to change. Too often he has been condemned in advance to oblivion as a second-class mind. After a brief period of Thermidorian glory, he would fade into the shadows of intellectual history, his reputation damaged by La Harpe, Lamartine, Baudrillart, Charma and others. With regard to the long silence that customarily greets thinkers whose ideas run way ahead of their times, Jean-Pierre Schandeler reminds us, in the introduction to his study of nineteenth-century interpretations of Condorcet's work, of Nietzsche's memorable self-reference in *The Anti-Christ* to those 'who are born posthumously'.[3] Condorcet must now surely be counted in the ranks of the posthumous newly born. For him posterity has really only just started.

The nineteenth century, and particularly the last decade of the nineteenth century, did not entirely ignore Condorcet as a subject for scholarship. This was the century that saw the publication of François Arago's informative and sympathetic biography of 1841, incorporated into the first volume of the 1847–9 *Œuvres complètes* that Arago edited in collaboration with Condorcet's daughter Mme O'Connor and her husband General Arthur O'Connor, A. Balandreau's 1873 biography, M. Gillet's *L'Utopie de Condorcet* (1883) and J.-F.-E. Robinet's *Condorcet. Sa vie et son œuvre, 1743–1794* (1893). C. Henry published his still authoritative edition of the *Correspondance inédite de Condorcet et de Turgot* (*1770–1779*) in 1883, and four years later an edition of the letters exchanged between Mlle de Lespinasse, d'Alembert and Condorcet. On 20 April 1890 the *Société Positiviste* organised a Condorcet festival at Bourg-la-Reine, and in 1893 the *Lycée Fontanes* became the *Lycée Condorcet*. Many nineteenth-century studies of Condorcet, however, often took the minimalist form of fragmentary *notices*, brief encyclopaedia entries, portraits and monographs that tended to treat him as a peripheral figure, one of the crowd, as in J. Guadet's *Les Girondins* (1856), F.-J. Picavet's *Les Idéologues* (1891) or A. Lichtenberger's *Le Socialisme au XVIIIe siècle* (1895).

The first major scholarly analysis devoted more exclusively and more comprehensively to Condorcet in the twentieth century was F. Vial's *Condorcet et l'éducation démocratique* of 1902, soon to be followed by L. Cahen's magisterial *Condorcet et la Révolution française* (1904), and in the same year by F. Alengry's *Condorcet. Guide de la Révolution française* (reprinted in 1971).

[3] J.-P. Schandeler, *Les Interprétations de Condorcet. Symboles et concepts (1794–1894) SVEC* 03 (2000), p. 1.

After the bumper Condorcet year of 1904 relatively little of substance in the way of dedicated monographs would appear for almost another fifty years, with the notable exceptions of H. Bigot's *Les Idées de Condorcet sur l'instruction publique*, published in 1912, Hélène Delsaux's *Condorcet journaliste (1790–1794)*, Jammy-Schmidt's *Les Grandes Thèses radicales de Condorcet à Edouard Herriot*, both published in 1931, and, more marginally, Maxime Leroy's *Les Précurseurs français du socialisme, de Condorcet à Proudhon*, published in 1948. That year also saw the publication in English of Alexandre Koyré's illuminating lecture on Condorcet.[4] Only in the 1950s, however, did the case for Condorcet's elevation to the ranks of the world's great pioneering socio-political scientists begin to be seriously argued when he was brought to international attention with groundbreaking studies such as K. J. Arrow's *Social Choice and Individual Values* (first published in 1951, reprinted in 1963, and translated into French in 1974), G.-T. Guilbaud's article 'Les Théories de l'intérêt et le problème logique de l'agrégation' (first published in 1952, reprinted in 1968), and G.-G. Granger's *La Mathématique sociale du marquis de Condorcet* (first published in 1956, reprinted in 1984).

After 1956 studies of Condorcet as a social scientist started to proliferate in the English-speaking world, particularly with regard to his work on probability theory and social choice, although commentary was not always entirely positive, as in the case of Duncan Black's illuminating study of 1958, *The Theory of Committees and Elections*. More recently, still following the lead given by Arrow, scholars like A. B. Urken, S. J. Traflet, B. Grofman, G. Owen, C. Plott, W. H. Riker, H. P. Young and I. S. McLean, from different angles, have all brought Condorcet's theory of social choice, his jury theorem, his analysis of voting procedures and other aspects of probabilistic theory with a modern relevance into closer focus. Since the 1970s much valuable work has been done on Condorcet's mathematics and its applications by B. Bru and P. Crépel. The availability of modern English translations of Condorcet's writings, including translations of more technical texts, owes much to the efforts of Baker, Urken, Pinkham, McLean and Hewitt. J. Barraclough's 1955 translation of the *Esquisse* is still invaluable, but a new English edition and translation is currently being prepared by S. Lukes and U. Vogel for publication in the Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought series. My own edition and translation of the *Idées sur le despotisme* will appear in Volume 11 of the new Cambridge Reader in Western Political Thought, edited by I. Harris and G. Parry.

[4] A. Koyré, 'Condorcet', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 9 (1948), 131–52.

The mid-century rediscovery of Condorcet has been reinforced by the remarkable editorial and publishing initiatives taken between 1968 and 1972, most notably when the facsimile of the Arago–O'Connor edition of the *Œuvres complètes* was placed at the disposal of scholars (published by Frommann Verlag), together with the Singer–Polignac facsimile edition of the *Eloges des académiciens* and the Slatkine reprints of the work of Robinet, Cahen and Alengry. The twelve-volume Arago–O'Connor edition of 1847–9 is still the standard collective edition, although the dating of texts is not always accurate and the edition is far from being complete, a major omission being Condorcet's mathematical and scientific works. A new, much-needed third complete edition is currently in progress, and meanwhile the publication in the last few years of useful modern editions of individual treatises has been invaluable. What Callens has called the 'canonisation laïque'[5] of Condorcet gained its most dramatic twentieth-century momentum in the English-speaking world with the publication of Keith Baker's *Condorcet. From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics* in 1975. As far as recent publications contributing to the internationalisation of the great man's writings, McLean and Hewitt's *Condorcet. Foundations of Social Choice and Political Theory* of 1994 stands out as a scholarly tool that opens up to a non-francophone readership key texts on the theory of voting and human rights with twenty excellently translated extracts.

The birth of Condorcet's reputation, in the Nietzschean sense, has thus been a slowly evolving event, but it has finally taken place, and in the course of the last half-century it has been carefully nourished by outstanding specialists in France and elsewhere, to whose pioneering editorial and exegetical achievements I am deeply indebted. Of particular interest is the way in which Condorcet scholarship over the last few decades has been enriched by political and social scientists, as well as economic historians, working outside France, but much interesting work on Condorcet still remains accessible only to francophone readers. Among the still relatively rare monographs published in English since 1990, the illuminating comparative study of Condorcet and Adam Smith, *Economic Sentiments. Adam Smith, Condorcet and the Enlightenment*, published in 2001 by Emma Rothschild, an economic historian, stands out as testimony to the increasing interest in Condorcet shown by modern scholars of the Enlightenment. Particular attention should also be drawn to three indispensable volumes of papers given by distinguished specialists at international Condorcet

[5] S. Callens, 'Condorcet dans l'histoire de la politique positiviste', in P. Crépel and C. Gilain (eds.), *Condorcet. Mathématicien, économiste, philosophe, homme politique* (Paris: Minerve, 1989), p. 501.

colloquia: first, P. Michaud's *Hommage à Condorcet*, published by the Centre Scientifique IBM in 1985 marking the bicentenary of the first appearance in print of Condorcet's seminal treatise, the *Essai sur l'application de l'analyse à la probabilité des décisions rendues à la pluralité des voix*; secondly, *Condorcet. Mathématicien, économiste, philosophe, homme politique*, published in 1989, edited by P. Crépel and C. Gilain, and thirdly, *Condorcet. Homme des Lumières et de la Révolution*, edited by A.-M. Chouillet and P. Crépel and published in 1997. On the biographical front, interest in Condorcet has been greatly stimulated by E. and R. Badinter's dramatic, richly documented account of a life and of events that would not be out of place in a classical tragedy, *Condorcet (1743–1793). Un intellectuel en politique*. This landmark biography was published appropriately in the bicentennial year of the Revolution, and was preceded in 1988 by E. Badinter's illuminating *Correspondance inédite de Condorcet et Madame Suard, 1771–1791*.

All this activity has helped to internationalise Condorcet and rescue him from the margins of intellectual history, allowing the voice of a political thinker of outstanding originality and relevance to be heard once more. The contention that his voice is still worth hearing in the twenty-first century has become less challengeable than it was, although it would be premature to conclude from this that the process of rehabilitation is over. Condorcet's image still suffers from disparaging association with the cold, passionless hyper-rationality of a stereotypical Enlightenment ideologue. The unjust irony of the charges of coldness, and even monstrousness, levelled by commentators such as Sainte-Beuve and Bonald against a thinker so dedicated to the principle of human diversity, and so opposed to any unfeeling application to civil life of inflexible political and economic dogma, is only now starting to emerge. Condorcet's remarkable contribution to the architecture of modernity, with its bold, intricately woven, forward-looking proposals intended to facilitate France's transition from a world of *ancien régime* institutions and traditions into a more fluid world of ideologies driven by science and economics, has still to be accurately measured, but the status of his political writings as one of the great enduring legacies of the closing decades of the eighteenth century is becoming increasingly apparent. Condorcet is at last coming into his own as a thinker whose achievements helped to detonate the *ancien régime*, and usher in our modern political realities. Once known, even among eighteenth-century specialists, only as a writer whose reputation rested on the *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, most social scientists will be now at least familiar with the title, if not the complete text, of the 1785 *Essai sur l'application de l'analyse à la probabilité des décisions rendues à la pluralité des voix*; economic historians

will be aware of the importance of the 1776 *Réflexions sur le commerce des blés*; social historians will know about the existence of the 1781 *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres* (though possibly not of the expanded second edition of 1788).

Condorcet was a prolific writer who treated an astonishingly wide range of political, social, financial, legal and scientific issues. He worked in several intellectual dimensions – that of political theorist, public servant, elected representative, economist and mathematical physicist, and ideally his works should be read with all those dimensions in mind. The dynamics of progress that he elaborates in the *Esquisse* only really make sense in the light of what he has to say about probability, actuarial science, rights, the civil order, justice, the constitutional processs and human nature itself. He helped to lay the foundation-stone of a new world whose contours he deduced with a scientifically informed prescience quite unique among eighteenth-century political theorists. The present study seeks to bring together aspects of his mental universe that inform his political thinking, but which have tended to be treated in separate contexts, and to examine in the light of that universe a selection of his essays and treatises, some familiar but others still known today only as titles. In each chapter an attempt is also made to illuminate that remarkable interaction, characterising so much of Condorcet's originality, between the visionary and the pragmatic legislator, between his theoretical understanding of the dawn of modernity and his approach to the problem of actually managing the changes needed to bring 'a little good' into the lives of ordinary men and women.

CHAPTER 1

Profile of a political life

PRELUDE: 1743–1774

Jean-Antoine Nicolas de Caritat de Condorcet, nicknamed 'the condor' by his friends,[1] was born on 17 September 1743 in the garrison town of Ribemont in Picardy. His father, Antoine, was a cavalry captain of modest means whose noble lineage can be traced back to early medieval times.[2] He was killed on manoeuvres at Neuf-Brisach a few weeks after Condorcet's birth, and Condorcet spent his childhood until the age of eleven in rural Picardy more or less tied to the apron-strings of his mother, Marie-Magdeleine Gaudry, whom he adored. Fiercely protected by his mother, who by all accounts was as superstitious and emotional as she was pious and possessive, the young boy remained exclusively under her influence for the first nine years of his life. The uneventful blandness of these well-cossetted, formative years, during which Condorcet received little in the way of formal education, but on which he would look back with great affection later on, is relieved only by the graphic account that survives in the biographies of a young boy decked out in the white dress of a girl devoted to the cult of the Virgin that his mother insisted that he should wear, no doubt to the great amusement of other boys in the town.

The idyll ended, and dresses were replaced by breeches, when Condorcet's uncle, the Bishop of Lisieux, arranged for his nephew to enter the Jesuit College in Reims in 1756.[3] Adolescence with the Jesuits left Condorcet with an indelible hatred of priests, although academically he progressed well, and his precocious brilliance was recognised. Two years later, again with

[1] The nickname was first used by d'Alembert in a letter to Voltaire of 6 March 1777 (D20595).
[2] On the Condorcet family origins, see S. Chamoux, 'L'Ascendance dauphinoise de Condorcet', in A.-M. Chouillet and P. Crépel (eds.), *Condorcet. Homme des Lumières et de la Révolution* (Paris: Ophrys, ENS Editions Fontenay-Saint-Cloud, 1997), pp. 21–9.
[3] Prior to this Condorcet had received some tuition at home from the age of nine to eleven from his mother's brother, see E. Badinter and R. Badinter, *Condorcet (1743–1793). Un intellectuel en politique* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), p. 17 n. 1.