

Condorcet: Foundations of Social Choice and Political Theory

By Iain McLean

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The Marquis de Condorcet (1743-94) was a founding father of social science. He believed that what he called the moral sciences could be studied by the same exacting methods as the natural sciences, and he developed many of the tools for doing so. Condorcet has had two quite unconnected reputations: as the doomed and foolish Enlightenment scholar, writing about the perfectibility of mankind while in hiding from the Terror that would shortly claim his own life; and as the incomprehensible founder of social choice, whose Essai of 1785 was not understood until the 1950s. This book shows that he was not so foolish, nor so incomprehensible, as even sympathetic treatments have made him sound. A long introduction uses the latest French and English sources to put his work into context, explains the unity of his thought and explicates his difficult arguments in probability theory and social choice. The extracts from Condorcet's work that follow are in two parts. Part I, `The Theory of Voting', includes some extracts from the notorious Essai of 1785 but also later work which is more accessible and makes new points. Part II, `Human Rights', shows Condorcet the passionate campaigner for rights for slaves and for women, and the American constitutionalist. His poignant `Advice to his daughter' and `Testament' show the spirit of a man who knew he was almost certain to be killed, and would never see his daughter again. Most of the works translated here have never appeared in English before. They will be an essential reference source for everybody working in social choice, the history of mathematics and human rights, and the Enlightenment.

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Editorial Review

Review
`Even now, all too few understand that a society may change its decisions, even if every single voter's preferences remain unchanged, merely because of such things as differences in the order in which alternatives come up for decision or because of seemingly innocuous changes in voting rules. Let us hope that, because of this translation, insights of Condorcet's that went unappreciated a couple of centuries ago will, in the light of the modern theory of collective choice, come to receive the wide recognition they deserve. This is a most welcome book.' -- Mancur Olson, formerly University of Maryland, US `Condorcet was a powerful influence on modern thought in many directions, but it is only in fairly recent times that his role in political theory has begun to be appreciated. His analysis of social choice far exceeds that of any of his predecessors and raises virtually all the issues still being wrestled with. His work, scattered through many publications, has been brought together with outstanding scholarship by McLean and Hewitt and made more easily available to English-speaking readers. All those interested in mechanisms of political and social choice should be grateful.' -- Kenneth J. Arrow, Stanford University, US `Readers may well find some remarkably clear and refreshing insight into the most important and least understood mechanical aspect of democracy - majority voting.' -- J.D. Robertson, Choice `Iain McLean and Fiona Hewitt have done a great service to social choice theory by edited and translating a collection of Condorcet's major political writings.' -- Robert Sugden, The Economic Journal `This book will certainly be useful to students who need a quick contemporary, initiation to Condorcet's life and ideas. It will be also an important reference for scholars working in social choice, human rights and the Enlightenment. This book belongs in the library of anyone planning to do research in social choice an political theory.' -- Laur Razzolini, Public Choice `My own judgment, on the basis of reading the Condorcet extracts and reflecting on them in light of McLean and Hewitt's excellent introduction, is that there is a case for reading Cordorcet in the original - that there are important distinctive qualities in Condorcet's work which make it something rather more interesting than a mere inframarginal rendering of modern social choice insights. This judgment was not my initial inclination. What I had not realized is that the famous `jury-theorem' is really the point of departure for Condorcet's pre-occupations and that his interest in electoral cycling has to be seen through that lens. It is this that sets Condorcet apart from his modern social choice counterparts, and makes the work of considerable independent intellectual interest.' -- Geoffrey Brennan, History of Economics Review

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Text: English (translation)
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About the Author
Edited by Iain McLean, Professor of Politics, Oxford University and Fellow, Nuffield College, Oxford, UK and Fiona Hewitt, Hertford College, Oxford, UK

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Ruth Vazquez:

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