

Condorcet

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Condorcet: Foundation of Social Choice and Political Theory, translated and edited by Iain McLean and Fiona Hewitt Edward Elgar, Aldershot 1994

Rational actor political theory represents an interesting blend of economics and political science — not just in the obvious (and crucial) intellectual sense that it borrows its subject matter from political science and its method from mainstream economics, but also in the (at least apparently) more specious sense that rational actor political theory has not yet quite settled on its scholarly style. It is, for example, well known that economists are determinedly 'unscholarly', partly by disposition and partly by intellectual conviction. Economics has its disciplinary heroes, to be sure, but no-one much reads them or indeed feels much professional compulsion to do so. The view seems to be that anything that Adam Smith had to say that was worth saying is bound to have been absorbed long since into the economics corpus and can be simply taken up in a good principles course. The history of economic thought, on this (standard) view, is rather like the history of chemistry or of mathematics—an exercise properly to be left to the intellectual historians and the exegetes, and certainly not to be confused with chemistry or mathematics as substantive intellectual activities.

Practices in political science are different. For most political scientists, political theory is the history of political thought. It is simply taken for granted that any well-educated political scientist would have read her Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes and Hume, Macchiavelli and Marx, Rawls and Habermas and (perhaps) Foucault. Messing around in the 'classics' is, if not part of what political science entails, certainly recognized as a proper activity for a conscientious political scientist to be engaged in. Political science does not, like economics, think of the history of thought as a kind of therapeutic against old (or new) errors: political science thinks of it rather as providing for a continuous engagement with the great 'theorists', as if Plato and Aristotle or Locke and Kant were contemporary minds to be directly confronted alongside current scholars. I do not mean to imply by this that political scientists ignore the writer's context—that is much more an economist's sin. In fact, both the economist and the political theorist presuppose a kind of distillable time-free 'truth'. The issue is not, I think, one of basic epistemological differences—merely one of the style of scholarship. Political theorists read their ideas from the original texts; economists do not.

As I have indicated, rational actor political theory is in internal tension on this matter. That tension is not I think a big deal, but it is something that remains unsettled in the interdisciplinary hinterland and it will be rather interesting to see which set of habits comes to prevail. This book by Iain McLean and Fiona Hewitt will put the issue nicely to the test. For it is, I think, well-accepted that Condorcet is to social choice theory what, say, Smith and Ricardo are to neo-classical economics. Will social choice theorists feel a compulsion to study this set of Condorcet excerpts in the way political theorists might burrow around in a new edition of Montesquieu pieces (in English translation)? Should they? If they feel no such compulsion, what might one say to persuade them? Why should they not simply get their sense of the problems with which Condorcet wrestled from reading Arrow or McKelvey? To be

sure, if Arrow had got something wrong that Condorcet had *right*, then that would be good grounds for going back to Condorcet; but that does not seem to be the case. Certainly, it is not a case that McLean and Hewitt make. Put another way, will not most public choice scholars be inclined to read the interesting intellectual/biographical material that McLean and Hewitt provide in their very informative eighty-page introduction, and leave it at that? What is the particular advantage of ploughing on through the translations of Condorcet's own writings? After all, if Condorcet's contribution lies in the application of mathematics to voting issues, why isn't Condorcet exactly analogous to the history of mathematics—good for history, not obviously good for mathematics? The dust-jacket blurb declares that '...the works translated here... will be an *essential* reference source for *everybody* working in social choice...' (emphasis added), in the manner that dust-jackets are inclined to do. But as this really true? Is Condorcet's work essential for any social choice scholar (let alone all)? If we are to make that case (and McLean and Hewitt really don't) on what will it depend?

One such case (there may be others) rests on the proposition that what is important about Condorcet's '*social mathematic*' is less the mathematics as such and more the way in which social reality is translated into abstract symbols (and back again). For example as McLean and Hewitt observe, there is an important difference between Arrow and Condorcet: Arrow is a preference relativist, Condorcet a value realist. For Arrow, the problem of devising a social welfare function is that of amalgamating preference orderings when there are no substantively 'correct' preferences (merely a set of apparently minimal meta-preference norms—*independence of irrelevant alternatives, non-dictatorship, Paretianism* etc.). For Condorcet, the problem is one of discovering which of a set of competing judgments of a partially obscured truth is most likely to be true. The judgments of 'the majority' are instrumental in this discovery process because the number of (independent) judgments carries truth-value weight. Now, as McLean and Hewitt observe, Condorcet's view of things implies that the presence of the kind of valuations that create cycles is a major problem—not so much because of the cycles *per se*, but more because the variety of the value-orderings themselves tends to undermine his value-realism stance. For Condorcet, education, discussion, greater 'enlightenment', ought to eliminate cycles, because more and more people ought to come to agree on the truth. Obversely, when cycles are prevalent, the conclusion has to be that there is very little evidence available from individuals' judgments as to what the truth really is. If so, then there is little ground for one choice over another. By Condorcet's own logic, therefore, cycles are a problem less because of the difficulty of unravelling the information they contain—the expected loss from choosing any option must be small—and more because they contain too little relevant information.

To make the point a different way, the assumption of universal domain in Arrow's social choice theory can be seen as an expression of liberal principle. Universal domain in Condorcet's system is a *dis-equilibrium* phenomena which progress towards enlightenment ought to eliminate.

Given that the project Condorcet conceives himself to be engaged in is so radically different from Arrow's and McKelvey's (and indeed from the modern social choice project), it is important to examine Condorcet's work on its own terms. Or, at least, so the author/editors of this volume might argue. The difficulty here is that this argument also distances Condorcet from modern social choice, and perhaps makes the sub-title of the collection (*Foundations of Social Choice*) rather misleading.

My own judgment, on the basis of reading the Condorcet extracts and reflecting on them in the light of McLean and Hewitt's excellent introduction, is that there is a case for reading Condorcet 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.

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