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The Modern Idea of Progress by Jean A. Condorcet

Słowa kluczowe: empiryzm, scjentyzm, matematyzacja, industrializm, filozofia postępu.

Keywords: empiricism, scientism, mathematization, industrialism, philosophy of progress.

Introduction

With the transformations in geography, economy and politics, the new approach to the human being emerged. Humanism shaped the entire culture of the renaissance period through which the people of science and philosophy, literature and painting, as well as architecture and sculpture referred to the ancient Hellas describing the man as the supreme value in the world of nature. The aim of that approach was to develop man – humanist characterised by an investigative attitude expressed in inquisitiveness and boldness of formulated conclusions. This applied mainly to the mathematicians. Over two centuries, mathematicians accomplished almost simultaneously discoveries of fundamental importance, such as logarithms (Neper, Kepler), probability calculus (Pascal), analytical geometry (Fermat, Cartesius, Clairaut, Monge) or differential and integral calculus (Fermat, Cartesius, Newton, Leibniz, Bernoulli brothers, Euler, Lagrange). August Comte was a passionate reader of mathematics by Lagrange. Thanks to mathematics, progress occurred in astronomy, particularly thanks to Galileo, Kepler, Huygens and Newton (law of universal gravitation, elliptical motion of planets, phenomenon of the tides, and shape of the Earth). During 18th c, the

Englishman Halley and Frenchmen Bouguer, Maupertuis and Laplace shared the views of Newton. Mathematic formulas gave the impulse to the experiments by Torricelli who proved the existence of atmospheric pressure and vacuum. Fahrenheit, Réamur and Celsius, on the other hand, improved thermometers, which allowed Black, a Scotsman, to determine the specific heat of a certain number of bodies and to establish calorimetry. The 18th c allowed discoveries by Franklin, Musschenbroek, Boyle and Priestley and the Frenchman Lavoisier, which led to the establishment of modern experimental chemistry. As August Comte was interested in natural sciences, it must be said that those sciences developed slower. However, at that time the concept of permanence of species was being replaced by the concept of evolution by Georges L. Buffon (1707–1788)¹. That concept, later proven by Charles Darwin, was important for the Spencerian theory of evolution of the society. The period of 16th through to 18th c, and mainly the 19th c, was a significant time of interactions between science and technology. Great discoveries and technological inventions (H. Soles, A. G. Bell, E. W. Siemens, T. A. Edison, K. F. Benz, G. Daimler, R. Diesel, A. i L. Lumière, W. C. Roentgen, G. Marconi) proved the inventiveness of artisans and specialists. Against the background of social transformations, the ideas abolishing the absolutism of the enlightenment and modern progress theories were born.

The idea of progress of Jean Antoine Nicolas de Condorcet (1743–1794) emerged during the times of French Revolution. Condorcet, as suitable for the revolutionary thinker believing in the rational progress of human capacities, dismissed the Christian ideals. He believed in the capacity of the human brain and that the industrialisation of Europe will bring social order². As a participant of the French Revolution, he wrote the first version of the Declaration of the rights of Man and of the Citizen (dated 26 August 1789). His statements show the post-revolutionary image of social life deprived of religion³. In his proposed theory of progress, he questioned the European order from the times of Classical Hellas until the 15th c. In his theory, he questioned the social authorities, religious life and accepted the values of worldly life and permanence of the laws of the nature. The progress theory of Jean A. Condorcet was expressed in the work “Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind” from 1794. August Comte (1798–1857), the founder of positi-

¹ See: B. Russel, *Dzieje zachodniej filozofii*, Warszawa 2012, pp. 751–752.

² See: Z. Drozdowicz, *Filozofia Oświecenia*, Poznań 2006, p. 112.

³ See: H. J. Berman, C.J. Reid, *Max Weber as legal historian*, in: S. Turner (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Weber*, Cambridge 2000, p. 230.

vism, reformer of sciences and father of sociology was of major importance for popularisation of that theory⁴.

1. Modern references to the theory of progress by Condorcet

From the political perspective, the notion of progress had its beginning in 17th c in the literary discussions at the “Commision des in-scription et medailles” in Paris where Charles Perrault (1628-1703) and Bernard Fontenelle (1657–1757) referred to the modern culture and attempted to define the criterion of progress. C. Perrault, in the dialogues “Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes”, pointed at two dimensions of human progress; science and arts. On the other hand, B. Fontenelle saw progress as the process of gathering experience and applying the appropriate method. He saw the criterion of progress in the field of epistemology because in his opinion the level of knowledge is “measured universally by the method of thinking in accomplishing cognitive certainty”⁵. In this way, Fontenelle sought to defend the Cartesian method as the expression of scientific accomplishments of the “new times” and progress (cognitive) that would become the path of modern scientific accomplishments⁶.

The 18th c opened to cognitive progress (epistemology) that became the core of historical progress. Voltaire (1694–1778) used the notion of progress in that sense and Robert Turgot (1727–1781) formulated a more precise definition of it. Turgot presented his views in his 1750 speech “Discours sur l’histoire universelle” in which he presented the extensive programme of historical research on the subject of humanity progressing towards perfection. Turgot wanted to conduct analysis of the stages of human progress, defining the causes and outcomes by means of history. Like his 17th c predecessors, he attributed the major role to the cognitive progress. He saw progress in rational premises, i.e. in the cognitive capacity of human mind, rational progress occurring through science and knowledge. His friend Jean Antoine Condorcet (1743–1794) implemented his programme⁷. J.A. Condorcet presented a programme of historical progress in the work “E squisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain”, published in 1794⁸.

⁴ See: R. A. Podgórski, *Historia myśli społecznej. Od antyku do współczesności*, Poznań 2012, p. 97.

⁵ See: Z. Kuderowicz, *Filozofia nowożytnej Europy*, Warszawa 2014, p. 444.

⁶ See: *Filozofia Francuska XIX wieku*, Selection made by B. Skarga, Warszawa 1978, p. 283.

⁷ See: *Ibidem*, pp. 444–445.

⁸ See: *Ibidem*, p. 445.

Condorcet presented alternative views to those of Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704). He presented the laic mechanism of progress that was to take place through development of knowledge and science. In his outline of the development of humanity, Condorcet highlighted that because the man has the ability of improving thanks to own mind, the progress of humanity takes place as the outcome of human efforts without intervention of divine factors. The history of humankind appears in his philosophy as a linear continual process progressing along an upward line and his description of the progress encompasses not only the past but also the future. In this way, Condorcet presents the perspective of further development of humankind towards a system compliant with the laws of the nature and the entire elimination of suffering. Condorcet expected complete elimination of diseases thanks to progress in medicine while he limited the death of man solely to the dynamic factors and actually the lack of them. For August Comte, Condorcet's idea was the guiding principle in developing the "first philosophy". It also influenced Helvétius and Holbach⁹.

Condorcet combined the idea of progress with the belief in the identity of the human nature concerning the intellectual abilities identical for all the nations. Transferring scientific accomplishments of one nation to other nations is the natural process and condition for progress embracing the entire humankind. Progress also takes place through transfer of the accomplishment of earlier generations to the subsequent generations and continual absorption of the accomplishments of the past. Based on those assumptions, the idea of cumulative nature of historical development emerges, i.e. understanding it as the process of gradual and perpetual gathering of knowledge and gaining higher and higher efficiency of mind. In this way, progress according to Condorcet resembles gradual evolution represented by enrichment of human culture with scientific goods. Condorcet also explained the mechanisms of progress, highlighted the role of outstanding individuals, particularly inventors and scientists, whose accomplishments influenced the development of civilisation. This was linked to stressing the role of cognition, which he understood as the act of thought occurring in the scientist's mind thanks to his own effort. Condorcet further complemented that individual thread by indicating the role of human community. Passing the cognitive accomplishments of preceding generations to the subsequent ones by means of education was an important element in the development of humanity. Thanks to that process, the knowledge of each subsequent generation is at a higher le-

⁹ See: *Ibidem*, p. 445.

vel. That view of Condorcet's proves that accumulated human knowledge, thanks to proliferation, becomes the property of humanity in general. Condorcet also indicated the inhibitors to human progress that included political factors, by means of which the political authority, purposefully spreading misconceptions and opinions contrary to the laws of nature, built despotism, which is an obstacle on the road of progress. In that way, Condorcet drew attention to the struggle of cognition with superstitions of political (despotism) and religious (clericalism) nature. The outcome of that conflict, Condorcet believed, was decided thanks to humanity's abilities to obtain knowledge of the law of nature and thanks to proliferation of human knowledge (education). In that way Condorcet was building a liberal social order based on equality of all people before the law and full tolerance¹⁰. Condorcet attributed an important role to the belief concerning intellectual capacities identical to all nations and consequently built the theory of progress based on its universal human reach. Progress was also of a cultural nature because each nation passes its scientific accomplishments to the subsequent generations. We may assume then that culture, according to his understanding, cumulates the process of the gradual and continual gathering of different fields of sciences thanks to which the human mind becomes increasingly efficient. Therefore, progress according to Condorcet resembles gradual evolution taking place through material goods on the one hand and cultural goods on the other¹¹.

Condorcet devoted much attention to the mechanisms influencing social progress. He also highlighted the role of outstanding individuals, particularly inventors and scientists whose accomplishments influenced civilisation's development. Condorcet drew attention to the occurring differences and disproportions dividing people that resulted from the material status, different physical fitness and differences in education. According to him, those inequalities resulted from social inequalities but were necessary as they were consequences of differences in talents and formed the base of the natural division of the society into classes¹². It could be said that those views of Condorcet resulted from the natural law. The natural laws are the innate human laws and they result from the eternal order as the first elements of human nature. Consequently, the social order based on the natural law existed to reconcile the rights of the

¹⁰ See: Ibidem, p. 447.

¹¹ See: Ibidem, p. 446.

¹² See: A.N. Condorcet, *Szkic obrazu postępu ducha ludzkiego poprzez dzieje*, translated by E. Hartleb and J. Strzelecki, Warszawa 1957, p. 219; L. Kołakowski, *Filozofia pozytywistyczna*, Warszawa 2009, p. 40.

individuals. According to that concept, man, by nature, was a free being that may manage his actions. That is why the human being had no right to waive those rights, which were confirmed by John Locke (1632–1704) in the *Traité sur la tolérance* of 1767. The author of the “Letters Concerning Toleration” expressed the subjectivity of those rights through freedom and ownership. Condorcet on the other hand claimed that human rights result from nature and searching for them outside nature is an offence against the nature itself. Consequently, in his opinion, the human being is a feeling being able to think and to assimilate moral notions¹³. That is why, according to him, the “art of social coexistence would accomplish its goal then – that is to secure for all the ability of exercising all their rights to/for which the nature created (for) them”¹⁴. Hence, it is possible to assume that Comte, reading his views in which he stated that the “time will come when the sun will be shining for the free people accepting no other lord but their own mind; when tyrants and slaves, priests and their stupid and hypocritical tools will exist only in the history and the theatre”¹⁵. According to Condorcet, universalisation of education would cause the gradual disappearance of dependences and, thanks to that, each human being possessing their own rights will be capable of interpreting them by applying their own mind. Condorcet furthered this theory with the role of community. He combined the influence of science and education as passing the cognitive accomplishments to subsequent generations¹⁶. He considered the elements that disorganised the factors of progress. In his opinion, the inhibitors of progress did not originate from progress itself or development of education but from superstitions and opinion contrary to the law of nature. Superstitions support despotism, the major culprit of all the obstacles on the road of progress and they were expressed by disapproval for tolerance. Hence, progress based on education would favour further development of sciences forcing social progress. According to Condorcet, mathematics would play an important role in the future society and hence, the future era would be the era of statisticians computing and selecting the best solutions for social issues from that perspective¹⁷.

¹³ See: *Ibidem*, p. 120–157.

¹⁴ See: *Ibidem*, p. 212.

¹⁵ See: *Ibidem*, p. 218.

¹⁶ See: Z. Kuderowicz, *Filozofia nowożytnej Europy*, p. 446.

¹⁷ See: A.N. Condorcet, *Szkic obrazu postępu ducha ludzkiego poprzez dzieje*, p. 218.

2. Towards the conclusion

The philosophy of progress emerged then as a specifically European phenomenon only during the 18th c with the progress of secularisation and divergence from Christian traditions. In addition, the notion of progress was realised only at the end of that century. Progress was first noticed in science and knowledge, a fact referred to as something evident. However, obviously, it was impossible to stop only on development of knowledge. To get to the idea of universal progress occurring in all the aspects of life, not only science but of the human being in general, it had to be assumed that cognitive development also leads to moral development of human beings. The idea of progress had to be expanded to cover ethics. That became possible only through the assumption that lack of knowledge, ignorance and superstition were the sources of all evil. That is why the idea of progress was always linked to the belief that the true ethics was based on the mind. At the same time, it was to serve critique of the contemporary, traditional ethical views. Moral improvement of man was to be represented by rejecting the established beliefs and exposing them as superstitions. Wars, human feelings and passions but also religion and tradition were the major enemies of the progress of humanity. It also had to be assumed that human nature might be shaped appropriately by changing the law and social institutions. From the very beginning, the enlightenment version of the progress idea was linked to that of “social engineering”, reorganisation of the entire society in line with the rational postulates. This required reference to the natural sciences, which Comte did¹⁸. August Comte also considered scientific cognition as the causative force of progress of humanity¹⁹. He wrote: “we will position, without hesitation, intellectual development in the first place as the principle of the entire human evolution [...] social evolution is inseparable from evolution of intelligence”²⁰. August Comte assumed, however, that progress of science would contribute to industrial progress and that in turn would lead to development of social and moral progress. The 20th c, (not 19th?) sometimes referred to as the “age of progress” brought the true meaning of that notion²¹. Here the vision of progress penetrates not only almost all social theories of evolutionism by Saint-Simon,

¹⁸ See: Z. Krasnodębski, *Genealogia idei postępu*, <http://www.omp.org.pl/pokazZalacznik.php?idZalaczniki=11> (11.07.2016).

¹⁹ See: B. Skarga, *Comte. Renan. Claude Bernard*, Warszawa 2013, p. 41.

²⁰ A. Comte, *Metoda pozytywna w szesnastu wykładach*, abbreviated by J. Rigolage, translated by W. Wojciechowska, Warszawa 1961, p. 234 and 242.

²¹ See: P. Rossi, *Zatonięcia bez świadka. Idea postępu*, translated by A. Dudzińska-Facca, Warszawa 1998, p. 45.

Spencer, Morgan and Durkheim but also the dialectic theory of history by Hegel and Marx. The penetration of that idea into the general consciousness was the core of that solution. The level of social life of ordinary people was so difficult to accept that they referred to the Christian hope on the one hand and on the other to the socialist ideals supported by social aspirations equalising all people materially. According to Piotr Sztompka, the age of optimism concerning science, technology and industrialisation brought in the totalitarian systems of the 20th c, two world wars, death camps, fundamentalism, international conflicts, terrorism, climate changes and nuclear hazards. Similarly, Robert Nisbet claims that during the last decades of the 20th c it reached the gates of death²².

NOWOŻYTNA IDEA POSTĘPU JEANA A. CONDORCETA

(STRESZCZENIE)

Wiek XVIII otwiera się na postęp poznawczy (epistemologia), który staje się rdzeniem postępu historycznego. Sprecyzował je bliżej Robert Turgot (1727–1781). Wiele wniósł w pojęcie postępu odczyt Turgota pt. *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* z 1750 r., w którym przedstawił szeroki program badań historycznych, przedmiotem którego jest ludzkość zmierzająca do doskonałości. Program Turgota realizował zaprzyjaźniony z nim Jean Antoine de Condorcet (1743–1794). Wykładnię swojego programu postępu historycznego zawarł w *Equisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (*Szkic obrazu postępu ducha ludzkiego poprzez dzieje*). Był to rok 1794 i w tym roku Condorcet został uwieczony. J.A. de Condorcet zaproponował świecki mechanizm postępu, który miał się odbywać poprzez rozwój wiedzy i nauki. W swym zarysie rozwoju ludzkości Condorcet podkreślał, że postęp ludzkości następuje dzięki wysiłkom ludzi bez ingerencji czynników boskich. Człowiek bowiem posiada zdolność do doskonalenia się dzięki własnemu rozumowi. Dzieje ludzkości rysują się w jego filozofii jako proces linearny, ciągły, przebiegający po wznoszącej się linii, przy czym opis postępu obejmuje nie tylko czasy minione, ale również przyszłość. W ten sposób Condorcet przedstawił perspektywę dalszego rozwoju ludzkości w kierunku ustroju zgodnego z prawem natury i całkowitej eliminacji cierpień. Właśnie ten pogląd Condorceta będzie przyświecał Augustowi Comte'owi (1798–1857) przy budowaniu „filozofii pierwszej” oraz Claude'owi Adrienowi Helvétiusowi (1715–1771) i Paulowi Henry'emu d'Holbachowi (1723–1789).

²² See: R. Nisbet, *History and Idea of Progress*, New York 1980, pp. 10–46.

THE MODERN IDEA OF PROGRESS BY JEAN A. CONDORCET

(SUMMARY)

The 18th century is the opening to cognitive progress (epistemology) which becomes the core of historical progress. They were defined more precisely by Robert Turgot (1727–1781). Turgot's lecture entitled *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* of 1750 significantly contributed to the notion of "progress". The lecture presented a broad programme of historical studies whose object was humanity striving for perfection. Turgot's programme was implemented by his friend Jean Antoine de Condorcet (1743–1794). He contained the interpretation of his programme of historical progress in *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (*A sketch of the picture of progress of human spirit through the ages*). It was 1794 and in that year Condorcet was imprisoned. Jean Antoine de Condorcet proposed a secular mechanism of progress which was to take place through development of knowledge and science. In his outline of the development of humanity, Condorcet emphasised that the progress of humanity occurs because of efforts of people without interference of divine factors. Man is able to improve due to his own mind. The history of humanity is presented in his philosophy as a linear, continuous process taking place along a rising line, whereas the description of progress includes both past times and the future. In this way, Condorcet showed the perspective of further development of humanity in the direction of a system consistent with the law of nature and the complete elimination of suffering. This view of Condorcet motivated August Comte (1798–1857) when he built the "first philosophy", and Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715–1771) and Paul Henry d'Holbach (1723–1789).

