The Enlightenment Project and the Idea of a Social Science

The Enlightenment is the self-proclaimed title of a philosophical and social movement taking place mostly in France and England during the 18th c. Technically, one might date the Enlightenment period: 1688-1789 – between the “Glorious Revolution” in England and the French Revolution. It was known, in France, as L’age des Lumières. The movement was inspired, in many ways, by the Scientific Revolution. The stunning success that scientists had explaining the natural world served as a model for explaining aspects of the human / social world.

The key French thinkers of the Enlightenment were known as the Philosophes. They included such well-known figures as Jean Le Rond d'Alembert (1717-1783) and Denis Diderot (1713-1784) who published the 28 volume collection of knowledge called the "Encyclopédie: Classified Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts and Trades" (1751-1772). Other famous French thinkers were François-Marie Arouet Voltaire (1694-1778) who wrote the famous novel “Candide" (1759), Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu (1689-1755), who wrote "The Spirit of the Laws" (1748) [a treatise explaining the importance of the separation of powers and of checks and balances in a just political system], and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) who wrote the influential "Discourse of the Origins of Inequality" (1755).

One often underappreciated Enlightenment figure is Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794). In his writing is found the best expression of what later came to be known as “Enlightenment Optimism” and/or the "Enlightenment Project." Condorcet expressed a faith that Reason and the new model of scientific investigation would apply as fruitfully to human society as it had the natural world. This would generate a wealth of knowledge that would allow human society to develop into a utopia. Social understanding could provide a foundation for social reform which could, in turn, rid the world of most or all social ills.

From his “Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Human Mind” (1792) “The foundation of belief in the natural sciences… Why should this principle be any less true for the development of the intellectual and moral faculties of man than for the other operations of nature? Since beliefs founded on past experience of like conditions provide the only rule of conduct for the wisest men, why should the philosopher be forbidden to base his conjectures on these same foundations? Our hopes for the future condition of the human race can be subsumed under three important heads: the abolition of inequality between nations, the progress of equality within each nation, and the true perfection of mankind.”

Late Enlightenment figures outside of France included David Hume (1711-1776), the famous empiricist we have already discussed at length, Adam Smith (1723-1790) whose "Wealth of Nations" (1776), was a groundbreaking study of economic behavior (and is, arguably, the “Bible” of capitalism) and Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789) whose "Common Sense, or Natural Ideas Opposed to Supernatural" (1772), proposed a thoroughgoing materialist interpretation of all that is – natural and social.

So, did it work? Condorcet, himself, wrote an early constitution for the French Revolution in hopes of establishing this utopia. When the radical Jacobin party took control, he was arrested and died in prison in 1794. According to some, we are still trying to work it out.