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Illuminating The Enlightenment: Review Of "Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, And The Enlightenment" By E. Rothschild

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> **Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment**
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> By Emma Rothschild. Harvard University Press, 353 pages, $45.00

Should you care about the Enlightenment? Yes, you should, and more than a little, says Emma Rothschild, the distinguished British economist. In *Economic Sentiments,* Rothschild reinterprets the Enlightenment by breathing new life into Adam Smith, Jacques Turgot, and a fellow named Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, somewhat better known as the marquis de Condorcet.

Smith is the most famous of these, of course, and the most politically influential in our time. He lived from 1723 to 1790, and while serving as professor of moral philosophy at Glasgow University wrote *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments.* Jacques Turgot (1727-1781) was one of Louis XVI's many ministers of finance, in which capacity he tried to reform the French ancien régime from above. Condorcet (1743-1794) was a major player in reformist phases of the French Revolution, churning out treatises on the proper design of democratic political procedures, public education, and human progress. He died while in hiding and on the run from the Jacobins.

In her delicate and captivating portraits of these Enlightenment figures, Rothschild reveals an intellectual world of skepticism, reason, and hopefulness about the human condition. The best thinkers of the era showed a strong sympathy with the needs and aspirations of ordinary people. They insisted that everyone had the same capacities for political and moral reasoning.

Smith, Turgot, and Condorcet are upheld here as public intellectuals engaged in practical problems. Rothschild turns early in her book to the problem of famine (indeed, she dedicates her study to Amartya Sen, the brilliant economist who has investigated the dynamics of

widespread starvation). Famine is a crisis that reveals political and institutional failures in political economy. It is the extreme situation in which nearly everyone lacks autonomy. Human relations are warped by the deepest insecurity.

Enter Turgot, an obscure royal intendant posted to a desperately poor, backward province of France, the Limousin. Turgot worked vigorously to relieve famine there. He also sought, through edicts and what today we would call "jawboning," to generate a thriving and widely accessible market in affordable grains and foodstuffs. Famine would come back, he realized, unless he could both induce and stabilize such a market.

Rothschild's account of Turgot at work is very affecting. It shows a highly competent public administrator doing the right things. To create a functioning market in foodstuffs meant, for Turgot, also attending to why wages and income were not high enough to permit the ordinary person's entry into the market as a consumer. Thus, the relief of famine was not a one-shot policy intervention followed by a letter to the king telling him not to worry anymore. Relief of famine required steady attention to the institutions--in this case, the labor-market conditions--that would allow people to behave freely and autonomously.

A similar approach was central to Adam Smith's view of labor markets, as we see from his critique of the apprenticeship system, which in Smith's time involved families, guilds, parishes, and municipalities. Smith's hatred for this system has regularly been misread as a matter of his dislike for associations that created labor-market rigidities, preventing efficiency and proper wage setting. In this view, Smith was the first union buster.

What Smith really disliked, Rothschild shows, was the psychological, intellectual, and emotional suffocation that apprenticeship produced. Anxious adults put their children and adolescents into the care of relative strangers--calico makers, wheelwrights, and so forth. They would work the new apprentices and, presumably, also give them the skills they needed to strike out on their own eventually. Parents may have thought they were being kind to their children, assuring their material future. Instead, they consigned children and adolescents to a great lottery. The master might or might not be skilled, kind, and able to impart his knowledge. Even if he possessed these traits, the master might lose such qualities to drink, mental illness, or misfortune. Yet he would still exercise a legal and enforceable right to the apprentice's labor. The child's fundamental lack of autonomy could only teach the worst sorts of lessons. To all but the most innately charitable and wise souls, the experience would teach the importance of hanging on until one gained one's own miserable chance to be a petty tyrant. Smith's view was that decent universal public education and a removal of the enforcement privileges built into the apprenticeship system were the best ways to allow young minds to develop enlightened dispositions.

Of course, all of this raises the question of how the right sorts of institutions come into being in the first place. An openness to public critique and intellectual debate was a good start. For Smith, that was often enough. But politics also was necessary.

This is where Condorcet enters Rothschild's story. Condorcet occasionally has been portrayed as a fatuously optimistic believer in human progress, a kind of Mister Magoo of the French Revolution. As the Revolution moved toward the Terror, Condorcet, seemingly in denial, busied himself with writing up his famous "sketch" of human progress. But Rothschild sees in him someone more interesting and captures his enormous intellectual curiosity with great tact and precision. In an especially delightful passage, for instance, she paraphrases Condorcet's thoughts on how best to observe uniformity and diversity among such creatures as parrots and beavers. Soon the reader realizes that Condorcet was in many ways the most technically proficient of these three philosophes, being at once a pioneer in mathematics, economics, and political philosophy.

Condorcet was preoccupied with universal public education and with devising improved democratic procedures. Once free markets take root, he realized, the resulting inequality will provide incentives for those with considerable political resources to manipulate democratic procedures for private, not public, ends. In fact, Condorcet brilliantly demonstrated in formal terms just how arbitrary the results of democratic procedures could sometimes be.

The answer, for Condorcet, was discussion. Political truth was uncertain and decision-making institutions tended to short-circuit under many circumstances. The only remedy for these sorts of problems was great patience and "long discussions" during the course of which "all proofs are developed, all doubts discussed."

Condorcet thus revised Smith's view of how social change would most fruitfully occur. Smith thought that most change was spontaneous and ought not to be publicly guided. Condorcet, in contrast, wanted a more energetic approach. He thought that ordinary people ought to be talking with one another about politics and doing so in various kinds of forums--coffee shops and local public councils, for starters--and that they ought to follow closely what elected officeholders were doing. Such officials, for their part, should spend most of their time deliberating with one another and with citizens.

Edmund Burke hated Condorcet for this and decried his willingness to destroy "all docility in the minds of those who are not formed for finding their own way in the labyrinths of political theory." The great reactionary Joseph de Maistre scornfully asked: "What is this trembling light which we call reason ... ?"

An attachment to reason and skepticism, Condorcet believed, was truly the best basis for modern life. Ordinary people had a capacity to develop "enlightened dispositions," but only if they worked at it. Politics ought to be designed, therefore, so that people talked--and talked some more. Condorcet thus anticipated two nineteenth-century theorists of democratic deliberation, Benjamin Constant and John Stuart Mill. For them, both the public scrutiny of decision makers and robust public debate were essential for good political life. Mill, in particular, saw constant and open public debate as essential for individual self-development.

In general, Smith, Turgot, and Condorcet wanted to elevate "the mild voice of reason"--to use a phrase from the American Enlightenment theorist James Madison. From today's vantage point, one cannot help but be struck by how utterly radical this faith was. We have had two centuries of nationalism; fascism; world wars; the Holocaust; the Turkish assault on the Armenians; the Belgian-sponsored genocide of Africans in the Congo; the dislocation of native peoples in America, Guatemala, Peru, Australia, and elsewhere; the pogroms of Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot; and the construction of weapons systems able to obliterate much of the human world within 30 minutes. One has to marvel at the optimism of Turgot, Smith, and Condorcet.

But it would be foolish to dismiss it. The claim they made--one that we still believe and that obligates us to take these thinkers seriously--asserted the ordinary person's fundamental capacity to get things right given the right circumstances. As Rothschild often notes, Smith and his French colleagues regarded all the many obstacles to this possibility as "vexations"--a lovely word that suggests not impossible barriers but, rather, puzzles to be solved.

One of the insights here is that public measures are vital in bringing out the best in us. Think of the difference between marrying for money and marrying for love. When people marry for money, they do so out of fear for the future. But when they marry for love, they claim some of the better possibilities of human interaction. Society and politics ought to strengthen norms and institutions that permit all the many equivalents of marrying for love.

Rothschild acknowledges that taking these men seriously today can be hard. For one thing, market ideology can plausibly be traced back to Smith, and planning ideology to the other two philosophes. Many consider Smith a precursor of Friedrich Hayek, whose fundamentalist approach to market life is alluring to certain kinds of true believers. As for the two Frenchmen, well, they were forerunners of technocratic management.

But that's too simplistic. It ignores what Smith, Turgot, and Condorcet in fact worried and thought about. By the time you really learn about them, Rothschild promises, you will want to adopt them as intellectual friends and inspirations.