

The Political Economy of the French and American Enlightenments: Jefferson in Paris 1785-9

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Important note: This paper updates, and is to be read in conjunction with, IM and A. B. Urken, 'Did Jefferson or Madison understand Condorcet's theory of social choice?', *Public Choice* **73**: 445-457, 1992.

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Introduction

This paper updates, and is to be read in conjunction with, IM and A. B. Urken, 'Did Jefferson or Madison understand Condorcet's theory of social choice?', *Public Choice* 73: 445-457, 1992. Section 1 sets out the intellectual puzzles that this work addresses. Section 2 summarizes our 1992 findings. Section 3 reports on progress and modifications to our 1992 conclusions since restarting this work in summer 2001. Section 4 concludes.

1. Jefferson's under-studied networks

At first hearing it may sound both absurd and dangerously arrogant to claim that there is anything new to say about Thomas Jefferson's term as American Minister in Paris from 1784 to 1789. Merely listing some relevant items from the unending outpouring of material about a man who fascinates scholars as much now as 200 years ago would occupy an unfair amount of space. Relevant items include distinguished biographies old and new (Malone 1948-81; Ellis 1998). These two citations merely span the range - from a fellow-Virginian who could not conceive that TJ would do anything fundamentally wrong to a scholar who must have empathized with TJ's elusiveness because, as now turns out, he falsified his own past. There are also works in art history, architectural history (cf Adams 1997 for both of the above), the history of library cataloging (Gilreath and Wilson 1989), gardening history, music history, wine history, and an expensive and tasteful movie (Merchant-Ivory 1995 - Nick Nolte as Jefferson, James Earl Jones as James Hemings, Thandie Newton as Sally Hemings, Greta Scacchi as TJ's lover Maria Cosway and Simon (over the top) Callow as her husband; a Kirkman harpsichord as Martha Jefferson's (Gwyneth Paltrow) Kirkman harpsichord; but it flopped). The first recorded appearance of Sally Hemings in Jefferson's life was her arrival as maid to Jefferson's younger daughter Maria ('Polly') in 1787, when Sally was about 15 and Maria 8. Abigail Adams wrote:

The Girl who is with her is quite a child, and Captain Ramsey [master of the ship that had brought them from the USA to London] is of opinion will be of so little Service that he had better carry her back with him. But of this you will be a judge. She seems fond of the child and appears good naturd. (AA to TJ, 6.27.1787; cf also same to same 6.26.87 and 7.6.87. In Cappon 1959/1987 pp. 178-183).

Sally eventually (but not until January 1788) appears in TJ's monthly list of salaries paid to his staff. Thereafter she usually received 12 francs per month, half the salary her brother James received (Bear and Stanton 1997 pp. 690 [Jan. 1788], 718 [Nov. 1788], and monthly thereafter). She is believed to have become pregnant in Paris, but Y-chromosome testing has shown that the male-line descendants of that presumed child do not bear the Jefferson haplotype, whereas a male-line descendant of Sally's last child Eston Hemings does (Foster et al 1998). However, the Foster paper is inaccurately entitled 'Jefferson fathered slave's last child'; what it shows is that a

male-line descendant of Jefferson's paternal grandfather fathered Sally Hemings's last child. This could have been Thomas Jefferson, but there are about five other candidates.¹

But in all this Jeffersoniana, insufficient attention has come from political scientists or economists. To say this is not merely turf claiming. Social scientists should take more, and better informed, interest in Jefferson's Paris years for at least two reasons:

- Jefferson stood at the intersection of the Scottish and French Enlightenments. He transmitted fundamental concepts of social science to the USA and more generally the Anglophone world. He may have been the first to use the phrase 'political science' in English, as a translation of Condorcet's *sciences morales et politiques*.
- He had a hand in both of the two most important statements of rights of the Enlightenment. Both are still in force and their language has strongly influenced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other modern declarations.

The intellectual leader of the Enlightenment, by the time Jefferson arrived in Paris, was the Marquis de Condorcet, who of course is (only) now well known for his fundamental work in probability and social choice. Other Enlightenment scientists and mathematicians known to Jefferson and/or to Benjamin Franklin and/or to John Adams in Paris include:

- From Condorcet's generation: Turgot (economist), Buffon (biologist), Helvétius (utilitarian philosopher; via his widow, who was one of Franklin's girlfriends), and the duc de la Rochefoucauld, who had translated the Declaration of Independence into French (and who was to die horribly in the Terror).
- From the following generation, Du Pont de Nemours, Destutt de Tracy, Cabanis (economists, followers of the physiocrats labeled the *Idéologues*, for all of whom see especially Chinard 1925/1979), and most of all LaFayette – not an intellectual but TJ's most important conduit into French policy making. [need to check Lavoisier]
- English radicals known more via their French connections than via England: Richard Price (statistician, transmitter of Bayes' Theorem to the world via the Royal Society) and Joseph Priestley (chemist).

Like Franklin but unlike Adams, Jefferson plunged into these circles with huge enthusiasm. Franklin had been honored throughout intellectual Paris as the greatest living American. A lot of this was pure hokum, shrewdly encouraged by Franklin himself, and culminating in the staged meeting between the greatest living American and the greatest living Frenchman, the dying Voltaire, in 1778. Adams, who saw it, was not amused. French intellectuals, impressed by Franklin's dress and appearance, widely but wrongly assumed that he was a Quaker, the subtleties of Pennsylvania politics and religion not having traveled well. The 'Quaker' lived well and set up a salon in the suburbs that may have scandalized TJ (and Adams) but provided him with instant connections when he joined Franklin in 1784.

Of course, Franklin was a world-class scientist, as well as a world-class showman. As the inventor of the lightning conductor and one of the pioneers of electricity, he was an honored

¹ For more on this unending controversy see especially the relevant pages from the websites of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation (http://www.monticello.org/plantation/hemings_resource.html.) and the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society, <http://www.tjheritage.org/>. Also see Lewis and Onuf 1999.

member of the *Académie royale des sciences*, whose secretary was Condorcet. Condorcet's eulogy of Franklin on his death in 1790 is one of the warmest of these tributes which it was his job as secretary to write (partly translated in Sommerlad and McLean 1989). When Franklin returned to the USA in 1785, he may have taken some of the new mathematics of inverse probability home with him. We recur to this in Section 3.

Jefferson arrived in Paris as the author of the Declaration of Independence and the coauthor of the Virginia Declaration of Religious Freedom. Were these facts generally known he might have been acclaimed as enthusiastically as Franklin. They were not generally known; but they became more widely known while he was in Paris. The indefatigable Lafayette knew about the Declaration; and Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*, written before he came to France in order to refute the arguments of Buffon that all the flora and fauna (including humans) of the New World were degenerate and smaller versions of their Old World equivalents, were first circulated in a limited edition in Paris. From it, his French interlocutors could read his low opinion of the current Virginia constitution ('173 despots would surely be as oppressive as one' – *Notes on Virginia*, Query XIII), and his wish that Virginia would disestablish the state church, and adopt the declaration of religious freedom that he and Madison had drafted ('Our sister states of Pennsylvania and New York ... have long subsisted without any establishment at all. The experiment was new and doubtful when they made it. It has answered beyond conception. They flourish infinitely.... Let us too give this experiment fair play, and get rid, while we may, of those tyrannical laws' – Query XVIII).

2. Jefferson, Madison, and Condorcet: findings to 1992

In our 1992 paper (McLean and Urken 1992; cf also McLean and Hewitt 1994; McLean and Urken 1995, 1997) we track all links we were able to find between Jefferson and Condorcet, and between Madison and Condorcet. Briefly, they are as follows.

2.1 Jefferson and social choice

Jefferson collected books assiduously in Paris. They included all of Condorcet's work that was published while he was there, including the *Essai sur l'application de l'analyse...* (1785), of which he kept one copy and sent another to Edmund Randolph, governor of Virginia, via Madison. The works that Jefferson kept he later sold in 1815 to Congress, to form the nucleus of the present Library of Congress. With them he gave Congress a catalog, rediscovered in Jefferson's format only in 1989, which shows where Condorcet's work fitted in Jefferson's Baconian scheme of knowledge (Gilreath and Wilson 1989).

We examined those of Jefferson's holdings where his own copy is known to survive. (The collection was partly destroyed by a fire in 1851 and some of the books that survived the fire have been dispersed around the Library's collections. The Library is currently recreating Jefferson's collection by buying back copies of the lost books, see especially <http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/> and <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/mjthtml/mjtjhome.html>). Jefferson annotated his copy of Condorcet's posthumous *Esquisse (Outline for a history of the progress of the human mind*, 1795), but not any copy of the *Essai* that survives in the Library, nor any of Condorcet's other work on social choice. The most important of the latter are his *Essai sur ... [les] Assemblées Provinciales* and his *Lettres d'un bourgeois de New Haven...* ('Letters of a Freeman of New Haven', which Condorcet was, having been so honored by a town meeting in 1785). In the

former, Condorcet offers the first clear exposition of Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives; in the latter, he argues for unicameralism on jury-theoretic grounds.

Jefferson filed the *Essai* as a work on the theory of probability (which it is), and Condorcet's other work along with other political tracts on the current affairs of the relevant countries (Gilreath and Wilson 1989, esp. pp. 82, 83, 87, 93). The latter is not marked even with Jefferson's countersigning of the signatures to prove that he owned it (this is explained in McLean and Urken 1992, p. 456). We infer that he did not understand any of Condorcet's fundamental work in social choice nor on the jury theorem. This inference is supported by Jefferson's *Manual of Parliamentary Practice* (Jefferson 1801). We examined TJ's annotated copy and his correspondence with his old professor George Wythe about aspects of parliamentary practice where cycles could lurk. Neither Jefferson nor Wythe shows that he understands the problem, nor any possible solutions. Jefferson's *Manual* is the godfather of *Robert's Rules of Order*. Therefore Jefferson's procedures, which permit cycles to remain undetected, are embedded in parliamentary procedures not only for the Senate but also for all civil society bodies ruled by Robert.

2.2 Madison and social choice

McGrath (1983) and Schofield (xxxx) have argued that Madison understood Condorcet and that his institutional prescriptions were influenced by Condorcet. McGrath stresses the Condorcet of social choice; Schofield, the Condorcet jury theorem. In this section we discuss the McGrath hypothesis, reserving the Schofield hypothesis to Section 3. Madison had a copy of the *Essai* on his desk for nine days in August 1788. This was at the peak of Madison's career as a political scientist, but just too late to influence his most important writings, 'Vices of the political system of the United States...', his numbers of *The Federalist*, his speeches in the Virginia ratifying convention, and his letters to Hamilton during the New York ratifying convention (on the last two of which see Riker 1996, pp. 220-238). Likewise, Jefferson sent Madison Condorcet's *Essai sur ... [les] Assemblées Provinciales* (viz., the IIA text, see above) in May 1789. We found no evidence that Madison understood Condorcet's social choice work. The one text of Condorcet's that Madison certainly knew, he deeply disliked, as we analyse in Section 3.

3. Jefferson, Madison, and Condorcet: new findings

3.1 Condorcet and Jefferson

The first written link between the two is TJ's fragmentary English translation of Condorcet's *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des Nègres* (written 1781, TJ translation ?1789; Boyd 1950 14: 494-8). The last is Condorcet's letter of 21 December 1792² to introduce France's new and (as it turned out) disastrous US ambassador Edmond Genêt to TJ, written when Condorcet was a leading member of the National Convention and TJ was Secretary of State under Washington (Boyd 1950 24: 760-2). Between 1778 and 1789 both Adams and Jefferson met Condorcet on a number of occasions. Franklin, who already knew Condorcet well through the Academy of Science, first introduced Adams and presumably Jefferson to him. Adams made no comment at the time except to describe Condorcet's 'paper-white complexion'. But later he showed himself to be a fierce enemy of Condorcet's thought. In general, he disliked the French Enlightenment's stress on the

² But not recorded as received until 8 May 1793 – the delay being presumably because Genet did not hurry to present it to TJ but went on a triumphal progress through the USA first in the hope of rousing the Americans to mass support for the French Republic

perfectibility of human nature. Specifically, he detested the unicameralism that he encountered first in Turgot and then in Turgot's disciple Condorcet.

Jefferson's intellectual links with Condorcet

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