



ARTICLE

Three Versions of Social Science in Late Eighteenth-Century France

Thomas Lalevée* 

School of History, Australian National University

*Corresponding author. E-mail: thomas.lalevee@anu.edu.au

(Received 24 October 2022; revised 21 March 2023; accepted 1 May 2023)

The term science sociale was first employed by Mirabeau père in 1767, not Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès in 1789, as historians until now believed. Taking this discovery as its starting point, this article examines the ways in which the idea of a science of society was successively conceptualized in the late eighteenth century by Mirabeau, Sieyès, and Nicolas de Condorcet. Situating their ideas in the context of evolving discussions over the reform of the French state, it argues that they developed three different versions of social science, and that these reflected different attempts to answer the question of how to achieve collective prosperity, justice, and happiness under modern conditions. This article further highlights the changing modes of historical temporality that informed those approaches, which shifted from a focus on the social forms of a mythical past, to a concern with the prevailing norms of the present, to an emphasis, finally, on the likely developments of an ever-perfecting future. In doing so, it shows that the history of early French social science is best understood not as a process of gradual advancement, but rather as one of serial reinvention.

It is well known that the term *science sociale* was coined in the eighteenth century, and that a range of thinkers and reformers began to employ the phrase in the early years of the French Revolution. It was not, however, introduced by the theorist Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès in 1789, as historians until now believed. The term, in fact, first appeared in 1767 in a work initially serialized in the periodical *Éphémérides du citoyen* and later republished under the title *Lettres sur la législation* (1775), by Victor Riquetti Marquis de Mirabeau.¹ A noble landowner, and the father of the revolutionary figure by the same name, Mirabeau is best known as one of the followers of François Quesnay, the physician who developed a system of political economy centered on the idea that agriculture supplied the only sure and reliable source of wealth. Although Mirabeau made only a passing reference to the term “social science” in his work, his usage was unusual and

¹Victor Riquetti Marquis de Mirabeau, “La dépravation de l’ordre légal,” *Éphémérides du citoyen* 9 (1767), 82–142, 10 (1767), 5–72, 11 (1767), 5–70, 12 (1767), 5–72, 1 (1768), 5–63, 2 (1768), 5–81, 3 (1768), 5–82, 4 (1768), 5–84, 5 (1768), 5–97, 6 (1768), 5–114, 8 (1768), 3–85, 9 (1768), 5–81, 10 (1768), 5–87, 11 (1768), 73–160, 12 (1768), 1–85, 1 (1769), 1–36, 2 (1769), 1–67, 3 (1769), 1–61, 4 (1769), 1–63, 5 (1769), 1–119; Mirabeau, *Lettres sur la législation ou l’ordre légal, dépravé, rétabli et perpétué*, 3 vols. (Berne, 1775).

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

distinctive. In his account, this science was associated with the policies of imperial and commercial expansion that European states had pursued since the early modern era, and those policies had placed these states on the brink of collapse. Social science, from this perspective, was the science of failed experiments.

Taking this hitherto unexamined use of the phrase as its starting point, this article examines the ways in which the idea of a science of society was successively conceptualized by Mirabeau, Sieyès, and Nicolas de Condorcet, another of the thinkers who referred to *la science sociale* in the early years of the Revolution. Although each of them employed the term differently, and fleetingly, their usage reflected their shared interest in developing new approaches to moral and political reform in their time. It also spoke to their common concern with the question of how to achieve collective prosperity, justice and happiness under modern conditions; that is, in the unequal but interdependent societies of eighteenth-century Europe. Situating their ideas in the context of evolving discussions over the reform of the French state, this article argues that these thinkers developed different answers to this question, and that they did so through different ways of thinking about the meaning and purpose of a science of society, or social science. This article further suggests that those approaches were as much the product of the different contexts in which they were conceived as they were of changing perspectives on historical time.

The history of early French social science has been the subject of considerable scholarship. As historians have shown, the idea of a science of society had its origins in Enlightenment-era attempts to regenerate European monarchies, before becoming an explicit subject of discussion and debate during the French Revolution.² The first use of the term *science sociale* has not so far been examined, however, nor have the differences between eighteenth-century iterations of the science of society received sufficient attention.³ Attending to those differences in the ideas of three important thinkers, this article illuminates a significant yet underrecognized conceptual transformation in early French social science. For Mirabeau, *la science sociale* entailed a doomed set of policies, and the only remedy to the woes they had spawned was Quesnay's system, or one inspired by the organization of a mythical first society. Sieyès and Condorcet conceived of this science in more positive terms, but while the former devised an approach centered on an expansive conception of the contemporary division of labor, the latter promoted a predictive

²Keith Baker, "The Early History of the Term 'Social Science,'" *Annals of Science* 20/3 (1964), 211–26; Brian W. Head, "The Origins of 'La Science Sociale' in France, 1770–1800," *Australian Journal of French Studies* 19/2 (1982), 115–32; Robert Wokler, "Ideology and the Origins of Social Science," in Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler, eds., *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2006), 688–710; Michael Sonenscher, "Ideology, Social Science and General Facts in Late Eighteenth-Century French Political Thought," *History of European Ideas* 35/1 (2009), 24–37; Cheryl B. Welch, "Social Science from the French Revolution to Positivism," in Gareth Stedman-Jones and Gregory Claeys, eds., *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2011), 171–99.

³Only two brief studies attend to the differences between Sieyès and Condorcet's approaches: Jacques Guilhaumou, "Condorcet–Sieyès: Une amitié intellectuelle," in Anne-Marie Chouillet and Pierre Crépel, eds., *Condorcet: Homme des lumières et de la révolution* (Saint-Cloud, 1997), 223–39; Jean-Louis Morgenthaler, "Condorcet, Sieyès, Saint-Simon et Comte: Retour sur une anamorphose," *Socio-logos* 2 (2007) (online), <https://doi.org/10.4000/socio-logos.373>.

model of social theorizing on the basis of an unalloyed belief in human perfectibility. As such, their respective versions of social science were shaped by shifting modes of historical temporality—from past, to present, to future.

The analysis developed in this article also underscores the need for a new history of early French social science, free of predetermined assumptions about this history and its concepts. Following one strand of historiography, the search for a science of society in the eighteenth century represented a “pre-disciplinary” stage in the development of the modern social sciences in general, and in the development of French sociology in particular.⁴ Such interpretations also often suggest that early social science was characterized by a gradual process of secularization and specialization. Although not without merit, those interpretations sometimes fall prey to a teleological form of analysis and rely on preconceived assumptions about the epistemological foundations of social science, if not of science itself. They also tend to obscure the range of ideas and arguments that informed early attempts to construct a science of society, as well as the diversity of approaches these inspired. Using early references to *la science sociale* as an entry point, this article outlines a more contextual analysis of those concepts. It also shows that the history of early French social science is best understood not as a process of gradual advancement, but rather as one of serial reinvention.

Mirabeau’s science sociale

Mirabeau introduced the term *science sociale* in a series of letters addressing what he called “the deprivation of the legal order.” Initially published in the late 1760s in the periodical *Éphémérides du citoyen*, Mirabeau’s letters outlined the legal and economic arrangements he believed were necessary to secure collective prosperity and happiness, in line with the system earlier developed by François Quesnay. Having set out the moral underpinnings of this system, Mirabeau retraced the developments that had characterized, and in his view ruined, modern Europe. These included imperial conquest in the Americas, the expansion of overseas trade and commerce, the growth of luxury, and the range of fiscal policies introduced by European rulers seeking to capitalize on and further these developments. Following this digression, Mirabeau explained that his analysis had focused on the history of European states because, “whatever they say,” those states were “the most advanced in social science, as well as all the knowledge that results from it.” The point of retracing this history, he also indicated, was to examine the main tenets of what he termed the “modern thesis” and provide lessons “for the future.”⁵

⁴Johan Heilbron, *The Rise of Social Theory*, trans. Sheila Gogol (Cambridge, 1995); Heilbron, *French Sociology* (Ithaca, 2015); Heilbron, “The Emergence of Social Theory,” in Peter Kivisto, ed., *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Theory*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 2020), 1–23. See also Johan Heilbron, Lars Magnusson, and Björn Wittrock, eds., *The Rise of the Social Sciences and the Formation of Modernity* (Dordrecht, 1998); Richard G. Olson, *Science and Scientism in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Chicago, 2007).

⁵The original passage reads “Cette digression vous fait à peu près l’histoire fiscale de toutes les nations passées et présentes, c’est-à-dire celle de leur constitution politique et fiscale; car encore un coup, c’est là le point fondamental. Je prends pour exemple celles de toute l’Europe, qui, quoiqu’on en dise, sont les plus avancées dans la science sociale et dans toutes les connaissances qui en résultent: ce n’est pas la peine de revoir les choses passées, si nous n’en tirons quelqu’instruction pour le futur, et la présomption moderne mérite d’être considérée du moins dans ses principaux appuis.” Victor Riquetti Marquis de Mirabeau,

Mirabeau did not make a point of highlighting his neologism to his readers, nor did he go on to elaborate the meaning and implications of *la science sociale*.⁶ His usage nonetheless points to an original, and until now unexamined, iteration of the term in the eighteenth century. Social science, in this usage, was not concerned with rationalizing modern society and government, as it would be for Sieyès and Condorcet, nor was it defined by the empirical study of collective life, the conception that would emerge in the late nineteenth century. According to Mirabeau, this science was linked to Europe's lengthy history of misguided pursuits—"the march," as he put it, "of all the principles of our decadence."⁷ Central to this history, in his account, was the combination of selfish interest and ceaseless desire for riches that had fueled greed, luxury, and public debt in European societies, and that paved the road to "public misery" and "the mutiny of peoples"; that is to say, to poverty and revolution.⁸ To the extent that it was associated with what he called the "modern thesis," Mirabeau's *science sociale* was thus a critical moniker for the ideas of the eighteenth-century proponents of imperial expansion, commercial rivalry between states, and, indeed, public debt.

However fleeting, this first use of the phrase adds a further dimension to the history of early French social science, and it underlines the centrality of economic considerations in eighteenth-century discussions of a science of society. More specifically, his reference to the term evoked contemporary concerns about the stability and prosperity of modern European states as they centered around the morally charged questions of luxury and public debt. Once on the margins of moral and political discourse, economic questions had come to occupy a central place in reflections on society and government in eighteenth-century Europe.⁹ In France, the costly legacy of Louis XIV's wars, the seeming decline of French supremacy in the international order, combined with the rise of Britain as a military and commercial power, especially in the aftermath of the Seven Years War (1756–63), spurred a protracted debate over how to restore the glory and prosperity of the monarchy. As is now well documented, this debate—which included discussions over the relative merits of different forms of trade and the potential damage caused by unbalanced growth of the commercial, manufacturing, and agricultural sectors, as well as the proper organization of a just and efficient system of taxation—fed into discussions over the reform of the French state leading up to and during the Revolution.¹⁰

"La dépravation de l'ordre légal," *Éphémérides du citoyen* 10 (1767), 63; Mirabeau, *Lettres sur la législation*, 1: 115–16 (translation is mine unless otherwise indicated).

⁶Mirabeau used the conceptually proximate *la science sociale et économique* later in the same work, but did not provide further details about the meaning of the term. Victor Riquetti Marquis de Mirabeau, "La dépravation de l'ordre légal," *Éphémérides du citoyen* 12 (1768), 8–9.

⁷Mirabeau, "La dépravation de l'ordre légal," *Éphémérides du citoyen* 10 (1767), 10.

⁸*Ibid.*, 63–5.

⁹Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 2005); Béla Kapossy, Isaac Nakhimovsky, and Richard Whatmore, eds., *Commerce and Peace in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2017); Béla Kapossy, Isaac Nakhimovsky, Sophus A. Reinert, and Richard Whatmore, eds., *Markets, Morals, Politics: Jealousy of Trade and the History of Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); Sophus Reinert and Steven Kaplan, eds., *The Economic Turn: Recasting Political Economy in Enlightenment Europe* (London, 2019).

¹⁰John Showlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 2006); Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the*

Placed in this context, Mirabeau's reference to *la science sociale* pointed to his critical stance toward one side of the debate over the future of the French monarchy. It also alluded to his own alternative position in this debate. As Istvan Hont has shown, a slew of eighteenth-century thinkers endorsed the view that luxury, broadly conceived as a form of consumption derived from the desire to improve one's condition, generated a form of interdependence that could sustain commercial prosperity and social stability in the modern world. Often associated with the "private vices, public benefits" dictum of the Dutch author Bernard Mandeville, this view was developed by French thinkers from Jean-François Melon to Montesquieu and Voltaire, and it was later described by Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the basis for what a number of his contemporaries believed to be "the masterpiece of policy of our age."¹¹ Mirabeau disagreed. Although he wished to promote collective prosperity, not the virtues of poverty, he positioned himself as a critic of this strand of thinking, which he associated with an endorsement of selfish and unfettered consumption, commercial empire, and public debt, or, as appeared to be implied by his first use of the phrase, with *science sociale*.¹²

Although it was not picked up by contemporary commentators, this iteration of the term provides a fresh window into the program of reforms proposed by Mirabeau as a solution to modern ills. This solution—the economic system devised by Quesnay and now usually referred to as physiocracy—is sometimes described as an early attempt to construct a science of society.¹³ This system was, after all, an attempt to theorize the principles of a well-regulated polity on the basis of a rational understanding of human interests, and it built on long-running eighteenth-century efforts to promote material improvements in contemporary society. What is more, Mirabeau, along with Quesnay's other followers, presented their system as the product of a new science. It bears emphasizing, however, that they called this science a "science of the natural order," not a science of society.¹⁴ The distinction is not insignificant. For Quesnay's followers, their system was meant to reestablish society on natural foundations—as the term physiocracy, or "rule of nature," indicated—and the program of reforms they set forth was conceived in opposition to the debt-

Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution (Princeton, 2007); Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

¹¹Istvan Hont, "The Early Enlightenment Debate on Commerce and Luxury," in Goldie and Wokler, *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, 377–418; Nannerl O. Keohane, "The Masterpiece of Policy in our Century: Rousseau and the Morality of the Enlightenment," *Political Theory* 6/4 (1978), 457–84. On Hont's work see Paul Cheney, "István Hont, the Cosmopolitan Theory of Commercial Globalization, and Twenty-First-Century Capitalism," *Modern Intellectual History* 19/3 (2022), 883–911.

¹²On the broader context behind Mirabeau's critique of commercial empire see Paul Cheney, "The Political Economy of Colonization: From Composite Monarchy to Nation," in Reinert and Kaplan, *The Economic Turn*, 71–87; Pernille Røge, *Economistes and the Reinvention of Empire: France in the Americas and Africa, c. 1750–1802* (Cambridge, 2019).

¹³See, for example, David Carrithers, "The Enlightenment Science of Society," in Christopher Fox, Roy Porter, and Robert Wokler, eds., *Inventing Human Science: Eighteenth-Century Domains* (Berkeley, 1995), 232–70, at 245; and, more recently, William H. Sewell Jr., *Capitalism and the Emergence of Civic Equality in Eighteenth-Century France* (Chicago, 2021), 289.

¹⁴Pierre Samuel Dupont de Nemours, ed., *Physiocratie, ou Constitution naturelle du gouvernement le plus avantageux au genre humain* (Leyden, 1768), xxiii; Mirabeau, *Lettres sur la législation*, 1: i–ii.

fueled policies of eighteenth-century European states.¹⁵ To remain true to the original definition of the term, physiocracy is therefore best described as an attempt to remedy the ills associated with Mirabeau's *science sociale*, or, more conceptually, as an antidote to social science.

Quesnay's followers, the Physiocrats, set out the principles of their alternative in a series of lengthy programmatic works in the 1760s.¹⁶ A summary account of its moral underpinnings could also be found in Mirabeau's letters in *Éphémérides du citoyen*. To ascertain the laws that were required to remedy contemporary ills, Mirabeau explained in the first of these, it was simply necessary to reflect upon what "the first men had done."¹⁷ Pushed by necessity, he suggested, and with only the help of natural instinct and reason, the first men banded together and turned to "the cultivation of land" to satisfy their needs. They also concurrently instituted what Mirabeau called the "natural, primitive, and constitutive law of all [human] association," which consisted in the rights of property, of mutual assistance, and to the enjoyment of the fruits of one's labor. In this first and original society, there existed a happy balance between individual and collective interests, Mirabeau suggested, and this balance rested on the just, and in his view natural, relationship between human wants, the productive capacities of agriculture, and individual rights.¹⁸ Against the putative exponents of *science sociale*, Mirabeau insisted that needs, not commerce, supplied the foundation for human sociability, and that an agriculturally based producer economy, not a system of exchange driven by selfish consumer desires, was the key to social harmony and collective prosperity.

Conjectural accounts of early human society were a common trope of eighteenth-century philosophical discourse. Entangled with the history of European imperialism, those accounts often drew on representations of Indigenous peoples which formed the basis for racialized conceptions of "primitive" society as well as the development of stadial models of progress.¹⁹ Such accounts were also often employed to denounce social and political arrangements in contemporary Europe. Defining the genre, Rousseau's *Second Discourse* (1755) had inquired into the legitimacy of human inequality by retracing the development of society from its imagined first beginnings. Rousseau argued that humans lived by nature an isolated and solitary existence, and they had been brought together only as a result of external events, such as floods or earthquakes. The development of agriculture, in his account, was a stage in the process of growing interdependence

¹⁵On the word *physiocratie* and its origins see Michael Sonenscher, "Physiocracy, Globalization and Capitalism" (forthcoming).

¹⁶The scholarly literature on Quesnay and his followers is extensive. For a helpful way in see Liana Vardi, *The Physiocrats and the World of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2012); Lois Charles and Christine Théré, "The Physiocratic Movement: A Revision," in Reinert and Kaplan, *The Economic Turn*, 35–70.

¹⁷Mirabeau, "La dépravation de l'ordre légal," *Éphémérides du citoyen* 9 (1767), 82.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 83–5.

¹⁹Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge, 1976); Silvia Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment: Race, Gender, and the Limits of Progress* (Basingstoke, 2013); William Max Nelson, *The Time of Enlightenment: Constructing the Future in France, 1750 to Year One* (Toronto, 2020), 37–59. See also Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley, 2001); David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London, 2021), Ch. 2, "Wicked Liberty: The Indigenous Critique and the Myth of Progress."

between people, and it was this process which had led to the corruption and misery of modern times.²⁰ For Mirabeau, by contrast, humans had a natural capacity for sociability, and this capacity enabled them to come together and meet their needs, in a just and harmonious way, through the cultivation of land. More significantly, while he followed Rousseau's dire assessment of the state of eighteenth-century European societies, Mirabeau did not share his despondency about the prospects for reform.

A return to collective prosperity and happiness under modern conditions was possible, according to Mirabeau, because the natural motives that formed the basis of individual interests were also the source of universal principles of right. Following Quesnay, Mirabeau claimed that humans shared the same basic set of physical needs (food, shelter, rest, etc.) and those needs engendered a basic form of knowledge about how to meet them. This knowledge, which Quesnay termed *évidence*, in turn supplied the foundation for the simple but constant rules of human conduct.²¹ In this particular version of natural law theory, individual rights of liberty and property originated in the uniform and invariable experience of physical want. Accordingly, for Mirabeau, it was possible to envisage a way out of recurring patterns of crisis in the modern world, and in France in particular. The condition for this was that reformers revive the norms and arrangements of early human society, or follow, as he put it, what "the first men had done." While Rousseau had conjured up a narrative about the origins of inequality to indict modern states, Mirabeau conceived of his account to bolster the vision of social improvement of the Physiocrats.

As a moral philosophy, physiocracy was a theory of justice indebted to the long-running interest of European thinkers in the putatively natural attributes of human existence.²² As a project of reform, it was an original attempt to reshape the workings of eighteenth-century commercial society. This is where the "science of the natural order" came in. Although the laws that could sustain collective prosperity and happiness were, as the Physiocrats liked to claim, "self-evident," knowledge of how those goals could be achieved was highly technical. This knowledge consisted of the set of mechanisms that were required to implement the system depicted in Quesnay's *tableau économique* (1758–9), an ideal model of the circulation of capital derived from the surplus, or "net product," generated by agricultural production.²³ Those mechanisms included a single tax on the net product of landed income, the abolition of internal barriers to trade, individual rights of liberty and property, and the centralized form of authority needed to implement reforms of those types, or what the Physiocrats sometimes called "legal despotism"

²⁰Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (Amsterdam, 1755). On Rousseau's ideas and their context see, among others, Mark Hulliung, *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes* (Cambridge, MA, 1994).

²¹François Quesnay, "Évidence," in Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 6 (Paris, 1756), 146–57. On the Physiocrats' theory of natural rights see Dan Edelstein, *On the Spirit of Rights* (Chicago, 2019), 74–84.

²²Richard Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development* (Cambridge, 1979); Stephen Gaukroger, *The Natural and the Human: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1739–1841* (Oxford: 2016).

²³For a recent examination of Quesnay's *tableau économique* see Nelson, *The Time of Enlightenment*, 60–94.

(*le despotisme légal*). The “science of the natural order” thus combined moral certainty and technical specificity, and it supplied the solution, so the Physiocrats believed, to the disorder and corruption endemic in modern societies.

Although the term “social science” never reappeared in the works of the Physiocrats, they did sometimes employ the semantically proximate notion “social art” (*l’art social*). Popularized by the economist Nicolas Baudeau, another of Quesnay’s followers, the term was introduced to describe the actions required of the state to promote collective prosperity and happiness. According to Baudeau, those actions could be divided into three main activities: “instruction, protection, and administration.”²⁴ The “social art,” Baudeau explained in a series of articles in 1770—later republished as *Première introduction à la philosophie économique* (1771)—involved the state’s ability to ensure public order, as well as its capacity to promote economic growth, through investment in infrastructure and public works, and to diffuse knowledge in society through public education. Defined in this way, the “social art” set out the responsibilities of the exercise of sovereign power, ideally by an absolute monarch, according to physiocratic principles, and it was the practical counterpart to the Physiocrats’ “science of the natural order.” It was also, as scholars have shown, one of the terms that would be picked up by other French theorists to promote a form of public policy concerned with collective welfare and prosperity.²⁵

The Physiocrats’ ambitious project of moral and economic renewal informed a range of discussions in the late eighteenth century, and it would shape the ideas of French revolutionaries in particular. Although the notion of the “social art” was more widely employed after 1789, revolutionary reformers renounced many of the specific proposals advanced by Quesnay and his followers. Notwithstanding the influence of their theory of natural rights, revolutionaries typically rejected both the Physiocrats’ economic system and their penchant for absolutism. *Contra* physiocracy, an influential group of reformers also came to suggest that public debt might further social stability rather than foment discord, and that the development of commerce and industry could pave the way to collective prosperity, not to ruin.²⁶ It was perhaps no coincidence that two of the members of this group, Sieyès and Condorcet, turned to the idea of a science of society in this period, and that they did so on the basis of a critique of Quesnay and his followers. If Mirabeau had presented physiocracy as an alternative to *la science sociale*, these new versions of a social science would thus conversely be conceived as alternatives to physiocracy.

Sieyès and the division of labor

Sieyès employed the phrase *science sociale* just once in the first edition of *Qu’est-ce que le Tiers-État?* (1789), the pamphlet that made his name at the outbreak of the

²⁴Nicolas Baudeau, “Première introduction à la philosophie économique, ou analyse des états policés,” *Éphémérides du citoyen* 9 (1770), 121–57, at 141; Baudeau, *Première introduction à la philosophie économique, ou analyse des états policés* (Paris, 1771), 22.

²⁵On this legacy see, in particular, Head, “The Origins of ‘La Science Sociale’ in France.”

²⁶The intellectual background to these types of arguments is explored in detail in Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge*. See also Richard Whatmore, *Republicanism and the French Revolution: An Intellectual History of Jean-Baptiste Say’s Political Economy* (Oxford, 2000).

French Revolution. Published in January 1789, a few months after the calling of the Estates General, Sieyès's pamphlet famously proclaimed that the Third Estate were the only rightful members of the French nation. This was the case, Sieyès insisted, because it was their labor that undergirded collective subsistence and prosperity, and the nobility and the clergy played no role in this provision.²⁷ In this and other early revolutionary works, Sieyès then proceeded to outline the implications of this view and the course of action the representatives of the Third Estate should take to address the crisis facing the French monarchy. This included taking responsibility for France's public debt, not defaulting on it as some suggested. It also involved implementing the underlying reforms required to stabilize the state and assert the political rights of the nation. The passage in which the phrase *science sociale* appeared was concerned with the question of how to organize the new system of government in light of these pressing issues.

Intervening into the debate over how the Estates General, a body that had not met since 1614, should be organized, Sieyès argued that it was necessary to put aside the particular interests of each order. It was also imperative to turn to the "principles that are made to throw the most light" on the subject, he maintained, specifying that those principles were "those that form social science."²⁸ According to these, Sieyès explained, the Estates General could vote "neither by head, nor by order," since neither arrangement would generate the unitary form of collective agency required of political representation, a "common" or "general" will. To achieve this, he went on to suggest, the representatives of the Third Estate needed to meet separately from the other two orders, establishing what Sieyès suggested could be named a "National Assembly," and deliberate by appealing to the common interests of the citizenry, eschewing all individual or factional allegiances. They should also convene a special deputation of elected officials, or what he called an "extraordinary representation," to settle the organization of France's representative institutions, and of its system of government more broadly, by beginning the work of drafting a new constitution.²⁹

Whether or not Sieyès was aware of the earlier appearance of the phrase, his reference to *la science sociale* was markedly different to Mirabeau's. Although he dropped the phrase in subsequent editions of his pamphlet, replacing it with the less novel construction *la science de l'ordre social* ("the science of the social order"), Sieyès's usage reflected a more positive conception of a science of society.³⁰ Social science, according to Mirabeau, was associated with the ill-fated policies of imperial and commercial expansion of modern Europe. For Sieyès, by contrast,

²⁷Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-État?*, 1st edn, ed. Edme Champion (Paris: Société de l'histoire de la Révolution française, 1888), 28–32.

²⁸Ibid., 49: "Si nous voulons actuellement considérer le même sujet d'après les principes qui sont faits pour l'éclairer, c'est-à-dire d'après ceux qui forment la science sociale, indépendamment de tout intérêt particulier, nous verrons prendre à cette question une face nouvelle."

²⁹Ibid., 49–50, 79–80, 84–5.

³⁰For other uses of the phrase *la science de l'ordre social* in this period see [Jean-Nicolas-Marcellin Guérineau de Saint-Péravy], *Principes du commerce opposé au trafic, développés par un homme d'état* (n.p., 1787), 125; anon., "Adresse présentée au clergé velche en 1773: Réflexions de l'éditeur," *Correspondance secrète, politique et littéraire*, vol. 3 (London, 1787), 246. Sieyès also elsewhere referred to *la science de l'état de société* ("the science of the state of society"). Sieyès, *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-État?*, 64.

social science provided the insights required to guide contemporary political reform. Central to this science, moreover, was the issue of how to adequately produce a unity of will out of the individual and particular volitions that made up a political society, or the question of how to generate a “common” or “general” will. Although Sieyès shared Mirabeau’s desire to promote collective prosperity, justice, and happiness, he did not subscribe to his despondent evaluation of *la science sociale*, nor did he share his enthusiasm for regenerating contemporary society by looking to what putative “first men” had done. Social science, in his conception, was the science of modern representative government.³¹

Sieyès expanded on the meaning and purpose of his version of social science in another of his early revolutionary pamphlets, *Vues sur les moyens d’exécution dont les représentants de la France pourront disposer en 1789* (1789). Rejecting contemporary appeals to history, as well as the desire of certain reformers to model social arrangements on so-called “natural facts,” Sieyès argued in this work that the art of politics had to be predicated on a normative conception of human experience, or what he called “a science of principles.”³² Implicitly alluding to Mirabeau and the Physiocrats’ approach, he insisted that eighteenth-century efforts to reduce morality and politics to the simple facts of the “physical order” were misguided, as were more recent attempts to find laws appropriate to “civilized nations” by turning to “earlier barbarous centuries.” Politics involved modifying and adapting facts “to meet our needs and pleasures,” he claimed, and the legislator was less a student of nature or history than “an architect” working to devise “the social order that is [best] suited to a people.”³³ From this perspective, social science consisted of knowledge of the moral principles that underlay the practice of politics, and it supplied the normative foundation for the contemporary reform of the French polity.

Along with this divergence in method, Sieyès’s version of social science was also informed by a different conception of society and politics. Although they had proposed changes to existing systems of government, the reform program of the Physiocrats could to a certain extent be accommodated with traditional forms of power and privilege. Sieyès, for his part, maintained that the privileged classes were idle and parasitic, and that political rights belonged solely to the working masses. Sieyès also promoted the benefits of commercial sociability, and he highlighted the virtues of free and reciprocal exchange between citizens.³⁴ Although he shared the Physiocrats’ emphasis on the importance of individual rights of liberty and property, he had a more sanguine view of commerce and industry, as well

³¹For a similar interpretation, with more emphasis on the role of Rousseau’s political thought and the importance of majority rule under democratic conditions, see Michael Sonencher, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Foundations of Modern Political Thought,” *Modern Intellectual History* 14/2 (2017), 319–25.

³²[Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès], *Vues sur les moyens d’exécution dont les représentants de la France pourront disposer en 1789*, 2nd edn (n.l., 1789), 31.

³³*Ibid.*, 1, 30–33.

³⁴[Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès], *Essai sur les privilèges* (n.l., 1788), 27: “A citizen, whoever he may be, who does not occupy a public office, is entirely free to apply himself to improving his lot and to enjoy his rights, so long as he does not impinge on the rights of others; that is, so long as he does not commit any breaches of the law. All relations from citizen to citizen are relations of freedom. One gives his time or his merchandise, the other gives him money in return. There is no subordination, only continual exchange.”

as of the system of public debt that underpinned the fiscal policy of eighteenth-century states.³⁵ Rather being than a proponent of unfettered luxury and selfish consumer desires, or of the *science sociale* that Mirabeau despised, however, Sieyès considered that modern commerce could be reconciled with the ideal of a stable and harmonious political society attuned to the collective interests of the citizenry. This was the case, he believed, because the mechanism that underpinned contemporary economic exchange provided a model for the reform of the French state.

Sieyès first articulated the principles behind this approach in a manuscript essay from the mid-1770s.³⁶ This essay was conceived as the first of a series of letters critically reflecting on what Sieyès termed the “moral and political system” of the Physiocrats, and it serves to illuminate the intellectual origins of his science of society. Wealth, Sieyès argued in this essay, did not originate in the cultivation of land, as Quesnay and his followers maintained, but in labor, and specifically in the ever-growing specialization of tasks that impelled human industry. The “simple” products of nature were not sufficient “to raise the edifice of pleasures,” according to Sieyès, and it was the “concourse of works” that underpinned the growth of collective prosperity and happiness.³⁷ The division or separation of tasks made it possible to increase the overall level of pleasure (“to perfect the effect”), he explained, while at the same reducing the range of actions individuals had to perform (“diminishing the costs”).³⁸ Functional differentiation and occupational specialization—or the mechanism now commonly known as the division of labor—were the source of efficiency, for Sieyès, and this led to a greater production of goods and, hence, to greater levels of prosperity and happiness.

The concept of the division of labor is now usually associated with the Scottish philosopher and economist Adam Smith.³⁹ Sieyès nonetheless developed a different version of the concept to Smith. He also claimed to have anticipated him. In an undated manuscript note, he explained that he began to develop his theory of the division of labor as early as 1770 and that, unlike Smith, he had seen this process as one that took place both within and between trades.⁴⁰ More importantly, Sieyès emphasized the moral implications of this system, and not simply its

³⁵On his intellectual debts to the Physiocrats see Catherine Larrère, “Sieyès, lecteur des physiocrates: Droit naturel ou économie?”, in Pierre-Yves Quiviger, Vincent Denis, and Jean Salem, eds., *Figures de Sieyès* (Paris, 2008), 195–211. For his views on public debt see Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge*, 11–17.

³⁶Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, “Première lettre: Sur les richesses,” in Sieyès, *Lettres aux économistes sur leur système de politique et de morale* [c.1775], in Sieyès, *Écrits politiques*, ed. Roberto Zapperi (Paris, 1985), 27–43.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 32, 35.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 33: “First, each man satisfies by himself nearly all his pleasures. These increase with the means [at their disposal], and as they become more complicated, divisions of tasks [*les divisions des travaux*] establish themselves. The common good necessitates this, because workers are less distracted by tasks of the same nature than by different types of occupations and always tend to produce greater effects with lesser means.”

³⁹See Smith’s famous account of the workings of the division of labor in a pin-making factory in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London, 1776), 6–7.

⁴⁰Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, “Travail ne favorise la liberté qu’en devenant représentatif,” in Sieyès, *Écrits politiques*, 62. For a comparison of Sieyès and Smith’s theories of the division of labor see William H. Sewell Jr., *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: The Abbé Sieyès and What Is the Third Estate?* (Durham, 1994), 94–102. See also Michael Sonenscher, *Capitalism: The Story behind the Word* (Princeton, 2022), 134–9.

economic consequences. The division of labor was the “true principle of progress of the social state,” Sieyès insisted in the same undated note, because it allowed people to “enjoy more” but “work less,” and thus fostered the “natural increase of liberty.” He also indicated not only that the division of labor pertained to the realm of work, or what he called “private relations,” but also that it was a feature of the broader form of interdependency that characterized social relations in modern societies.⁴¹ This was what, in the early years of the Revolution, Sieyès came to call the “representative system” (*le système représentatif*).

The conceptual heart of his social philosophy, the “representative system” described what Sieyès took to be the interdependent relations that existed between individuals engaged in distinct but mutually beneficial activities in a common polity.⁴² The delegation of any task or activity involved an act of representation, according to Sieyès, and this meant that people could “represent” others not only when they were expressly appointed to do so, but also whenever they participated in the reciprocal exchange of goods or services. As he explained in one of his later interventions at the National Convention, “everything is representation”: “Representation is found in the private realm as much as in the public one; it is the mother of productive industry and trade, as well as of civil and political progress. Indeed, I say that it is the very essence of social life.”⁴³ Representation underpinned the development of trade and industry, according to Sieyès, and it also encouraged improvements in society and government. It was, as he described it, “the very essence of social life” because it sustained the bonds that connected individuals to each other, despite the variety of their needs, interests, and pursuits. If the economic dimension of the “representative system” was self-generating, however, its political dimension was not, and it involved the arduous task of generating unity out of multiplicity.⁴⁴ This task, the practical purpose of Sieyès’s social science, would be the object of the reforms he put forward over the course of the Revolution.

Sieyès applied the principles of his “representative system” in two ways during the revolutionary decade. First, he argued that the division of labor should apply to the practice of government and that the exercise of political power itself ought to become a specialized occupation. Although political authority had to be grounded in the common will of the nation, Sieyès insisted that direct or participatory forms of government were impractical in a country as large and diverse as France, and it was necessary to delegate this activity to a body of elected representatives and institute what he called “government by proxy.”⁴⁵ Political deliberation

⁴¹Sieyès, “Travail ne favorise la liberté qu’en devenant représentatif,” 62.

⁴²For a more extended analysis of Sieyès’s concept of the “representative system” see Murray Forsyth, *Reason and Revolution: The Political Thought of the Abbé Sieyès* (Leicester, 1987), 128–50; Pasquale Pasquino, *Sieyès et l’invention de la constitution en France* (Paris, 1998), Ch. 2, “La révolution par la représentation.”

⁴³Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Opinion de Sieyès, sur plusieurs articles des titres IV et V du projet de constitution* (Paris, 1795), 5.

⁴⁴As he remarked in one place, “the division of works, of professions, etc. is simply the representative system establishing itself spontaneously.” Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, “Bases de l’ordre social,” in *Des manuscrits de Sieyès*, ed. Christine Fauré, vol. 1 (Paris, 1999), 507–15, at 510.

⁴⁵Sieyès, *Qu’est-ce que le Tiers-État?*, 65–6.

between elected representatives nonetheless had to be structured in such a way that decisions gave voice to the common interests of citizens. This meant that political representatives had to disregard individual variations and inequalities between citizens, he argued, and consult only those interests by which they “resembled one another.”⁴⁶ It also meant that officials should concern themselves with the “common needs” of the citizenry and direct state expenditure, funded by a regenerated system of taxation and public credit, toward schemes in the public interest, such as public assistance and public education.⁴⁷

In addition to this, Sieyès also sought to extend the “representative system” to the constitution of the state in general. Sieyès developed this view most clearly in a speech in 1795, in discussions over what would become the Constitution of the Year III. As he declared in this speech, the French constitution needed to create a system of government that combined “division with unity,” or one that was sufficiently well organized to rule effectively, but not so powerful as to endanger public liberty.⁴⁸ Using the analogy of building a house, Sieyès explained that the different workers involved in such a project carried out a range of different tasks and activities, but that they all had “a common goal.” Likewise, the constitution of the state should allocate different functions to different bodies, he claimed, while ensuring that these all worked towards the same end.⁴⁹ There were several parts to Sieyès’s conception of the division of powers, and it is worth briefly outlining these, as they exemplified his attempt to apply his “science of principles,” or *science sociale*, to the practical reform of the French constitution in the late eighteenth century.

As Sieyès had remarked in *Qu’est-ce que le Tiers-État?*, the “mixture” and “confusion” of powers precluded “the establishment of social order on earth.” “By separating what should be distinct,” he had nevertheless indicated, it would be possible to “resolve the great problem of instituting a human society arranged for the general advantage of those who compose it.”⁵⁰ Following Montesquieu, in his subsequent speech in 1795, Sieyès thus emphasized the importance of the separation of the executive and legislative branches of government, a new principle which he described as “one of those views that is still at the frontier of science.”⁵¹ Further to this, he also promoted the idea of separating different functions and responsibilities within those branches of power, praising, for example, the distinction, in the draft constitution, between the authority to propose legislation and to decide on it.⁵² Whatever his caveats about the Constitution of the Year III, Sieyès declared that, properly organized, the French state could operate with the same degree of efficiency and coordination as the economic dimension of the “representative system.” The outcome of his schemes would be a form of government based on what he called the “system of concerted action, or organized unity.” This, he proclaimed,

⁴⁶Ibid., 88–9.

⁴⁷Sieyès, *Vues sur les moyens d’exécution*, 166–7; Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Préliminaire de la Constitution: Reconnaissance et exposition raisonnée des droits de l’homme et du citoyen* (Versailles, 1789), 14–15, 24, 41.

⁴⁸Sieyès, *Opinion de Sieyès*, 3.

⁴⁹Ibid., 9.

⁵⁰Sieyès, *Qu’est-ce que le Tiers-État?*, 131.

⁵¹Sieyès, *Opinion de Sieyès*, 12.

⁵²Ibid., 10.

“should become the French system” and it was the one that naturally followed from “the social art.”⁵³

These political designs underscore the differences between Sieyès’s version of *la science sociale* and the one implied by Mirabeau’s initial use of the term. For Mirabeau, social science was associated with the doomed and debt-fueled policies of eighteenth-century European states, and those policies, and the selfish desires that drove them, were a sure road to collapse. To avoid this fate, he claimed, it was necessary to revive the norms and economic arrangements of the first human society. Sieyès, by contrast, regarded contemporary ills as the product of the imperfect development of the “representative system” and, specifically, the imperfect development of the political institutions that this system required. From his perspective, the solution to France’s woes did not involve looking to the workings of a mythical first society or turning to what he called “earlier barbarous centuries.” Rather, it consisted in extending the mechanism that sustained commercial sociability in contemporary states, the division of labor, to the institutions of government and fine-tuning this mechanism in such a way as to produce a form of collective agency aligned with the general interest. In this way, Sieyès transformed *la science sociale* into the positive signifier of a science of—and for—modern society and government.⁵⁴ He was just one of two theorists, however, to develop a new science of society at this time.

From social science to social mathematics

Condorcet first referred to *la science sociale* in a report he delivered at the Legislative Assembly in April 1792. Presented on the behalf of the Comité d’instruction publique, the report proposed the introduction of a new system of public education in France, free and open to both sexes, that would spread skills and knowledge among the population as well as cultivate the habits required for virtuous citizenship. As part of this report, Condorcet suggested that primary-school teachers deliver weekly Sunday lectures devoted to the underlying principles of morality and politics. In this way, students would learn “the first truths of social science,” he maintained, before studying “their applications.”⁵⁵ No class of citizens, Condorcet then went on to declare, should regard the French Constitution or the Declaration of Rights as “fallen from the sky” and be blindly faithful to them. Rather, they should see these documents as “the development of those simple principles, prescribed by nature and by reason, which [they] learned to recognize, in

⁵³Ibid., 10.

⁵⁴For two early uses of the term *science sociale* that followed this meaning see Dominique Joseph Garat, *membre de l’assemblée constituante, à M. Condorcet, membre de l’assemblée nationale, seconde législature* (Paris, 1791), 81–2; [Joseph Antoine Cerutti], “Observations générales,” *La feuille villageoise* 33 (16 May 1793), 159.

⁵⁵Nicolas de Condorcet, *Rapport et projet de décret sur l’organisation générale de l’instruction publique* ([Paris], 1792), 7: “Ainsi, dans ces écoles les vérités premières de la science sociale précéderont leurs applications.” For the original transcript of Condorcet’s address see *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860: Première série (1787 à 1799)*, vol. 42 (Paris, 1893), 195. On the broader details of Condorcet’s proposals for educational reform see Adrian O’Connor, *In Pursuit of Politics: Education and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France* (Manchester, 2017), 111–20.

their youth, as eternally true.”⁵⁶ They should see them, in other words, as the product of social science.

Having suggested that lectures on *la science sociale* effectively replace the sermons of the Church, Condorcet proposed that students acquire a more extensive knowledge of “the principles of morality and social science” at secondary schools. This knowledge would then be further developed at the third level of the new education system and at the *lycées*, which would train France’s intellectual and scientific elite.⁵⁷ Condorcet also proposed that a national institute dedicated to research in the arts and sciences include a section on “natural right, the law of nations, and social science.”⁵⁸ Alongside these plans, Condorcet promoted the teaching of a new branch of study, at the higher levels of the education system, centered on the “application of [mathematical] calculations to the moral and political sciences.” Acknowledging the novelty of this subject, in a lengthy note added to the published version of his report, Condorcet explained that such calculations were useful in a range of fields, from political economy to public administration. More originally, he suggested that the calculus of probabilities in particular could be employed by students to gain more certainty about their opinions and choices of action, and thereby enlighten their everyday conduct.⁵⁹

Condorcet’s initial definition of social science—a form of knowledge that supplied the normative foundation of politics—closely followed Sieyès’s version of the concept. This was no coincidence. Sieyès and Condorcet were political allies in the early years of the French Revolution and they belonged to the same political clubs and factions, notably the Société de 1789, where the idea of social science is known to have been the subject of discussion and debate.⁶⁰ Condorcet also shared a broadly similar political philosophy to Sieyès, calling for an end to hereditary privilege, a more representative constitution, individual rights of liberty and property, and the nationalization of public debt. Like Sieyès, and *contra* Mirabeau, he also regarded modern commerce and industry as sources of collective prosperity, not portents of ruin.⁶¹ Condorcet nevertheless conceived of the purpose of *la science sociale* in a different way to Sieyès. He also promoted the development of a unique branch of social science, which he would come to call “social mathematics” (*la mathématique sociale*). Together, this spoke to Condorcet’s different conception of this science and, in turn, to his different perspective on how to realize collective prosperity, justice, and happiness under modern conditions.

The distinctiveness of Condorcet’s approach is well illustrated by his warnings about the division of labor. Whilst he regarded occupational specialization as a

⁵⁶Condorcet, *Rapport et projet de décret*, 7.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 13, 33–4, 85–6, 90.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 96. This proposal would inspire the later establishment of the Institut national des sciences et des arts, now the Institut de France, in Paris.

⁵⁹Condorcet, *Rapport et projet de décret*, 114–19.

⁶⁰Keith M. Baker, “Politics and Social Science in Eighteenth-Century France: The Société de 1789,” in Alfred Cobban and J. F. Bosher, eds., *French Government and Society 1500–1850: Essays in Memory of Alfred Cobban* (London, 1973), 203–30.

⁶¹On Condorcet’s political and economic thought see Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA, 2002); David Williams, *Condorcet and Modernity* (Cambridge, 2004).

source of property in modern society, Condorcet was more emphatic than Sieyès about the need to rectify its adverse effects. As he noted in his report to the Legislative Assembly, the “perfection of manufacturing” involved the “ever greater division of operations,” but this meant that individuals had to perform increasingly “mechanical” tasks and that their work tended to be reduced “to a small number of simple motions.” This could lead to a narrowing of minds, Condorcet warned, and exacerbate existing inequalities in society. Public education was a way of correcting this, in his view, as it would serve to inculcate in citizens “a common reason,” whatever their occupations.⁶² The purpose of *la science sociale* was much the same. As Condorcet presented it in the passage in which he first referred to the term, without the diffusion of this science, and the intellectual independence that this would foster, humanity would continue to be divided into two classes. It would remain split, he declared, between “the men who reasoned and the men who believed,” or, as he put it more dramatically, between “masters and slaves.”⁶³

Although he followed Sieyès’s definition of *la science sociale*, Condorcet did not envision the practical role of this science in the same way. Social science, in Sieyès’s version of the concept, was intended to guide contemporary efforts at political reform, and it was therefore essentially a tool for legislators and public administrators. For Condorcet, this science could be taught to school students, and the diffusion of its principles would serve to counter the ill effects of ignorance and dogma, encourage the common but independent use of reason by citizens, and thereby help to overcome the age-old division between rulers and ruled. Condorcet, like Sieyès, promoted the establishment of a form of government that gave voice to the citizenry’s shared interests, without undermining the variety of occupations and activities that underpinned collective prosperity. Whereas Sieyès focused on the institutional means of achieving this goal, primarily concentrating on the reform of the constitution of the state, Condorcet emphasized the creation of an enlightened and rational citizenry through public education. These two approaches were more than just different solutions to the same problem; they pointed to different approaches to the question of how to realize a just and prosperous society in the modern world.

For Sieyès, collective prosperity was a function of the division of labor, and a just and harmonious political society, under modern conditions, involved extending this system to politics. The foundation of Sieyès’s approach, from this perspective, was the divergence of human abilities and capacities, and his version of social science looked to harness this divergence to political ends. Condorcet’s social science was based on the reverse approach. While he shared Sieyès’s view of the economic benefits of the division of labor, Condorcet was concerned with correcting its ill effects through the diffusion of basic skills and knowledge in society. Although he promoted the value of training a scientific and intellectual elite, he envisioned public education in general, and the teaching of social science in particular, as a means of fostering the equal capacity to reason among citizens, thus undermining the debilitating impact of repetitive, and especially manual, labor. The

⁶²Condorcet, *Rapport et projet de décret*, 14–15, 55–6. Smith, it might be noted, had issued a similar warning about the effects of the division of labor in society in *The Wealth of Nations*.

⁶³Condorcet, *Rapport et projet de décret*, 7–8.

“fundamental principle of [this] work,” he announced in his report to the National Assembly, was “to restore equality,” not through a “debasement and constraining” form of leveling, as some of his contemporaries proposed, but “by propagating enlightenment.”⁶⁴ If Sieyès’s social science sought to harness human divergence, then Condorcet’s undertook to foster convergence, and, more exactly, the convergence of individuals’ capacity for rational evaluation and decision making.⁶⁵

The specificity of Condorcet’s version of social science, and its differences from both Sieyès’s and Mirabeau’s approaches, can be further illuminated by turning to the original branch of knowledge he promoted in his works, a mathematically informed science of morality and politics.⁶⁶ Although he remarked on the novelty of this subject in his 1792 report, Condorcet had begun to develop and apply this branch of social science before the French Revolution. As he had announced in his reception speech at the Académie française in 1782, the moral and political sciences could reach a new degree of certainty if they adopted the same methods as the physical sciences, i.e. empirical observation and rational analysis.⁶⁷ They should also draw more extensively on mathematics, he insisted, as mathematical calculations supplied the best way of treating a number of legal and economic questions.⁶⁸ Further to this, Condorcet specified that a distinction had to be made between the “small number” of facts that underlay morality and politics—such as individual rights or the injustice of slavery—and the larger set of opinions that were involved in government and public policy. The former were “as general and as constant as the facts of the physical order,” he claimed, and impervious to arithmetic. The latter were not, however, and they were therefore subject to calculation.⁶⁹

Like Sieyès, Condorcet presented his model of social theorizing as an alternative, if not corrective, to physiocracy. Mentored as a young man by Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, Baron de l’Aulne, a fellow traveler of the Physiocrats, Condorcet praised the contribution of Quesnay’s followers to the cause of liberty and prosperity in the eighteenth century.⁷⁰ As he explained in a note to his 1782 reception speech, the Physiocrats had nevertheless failed to adequately distinguish the “different degrees of proof” required of the principles they endorsed and of the opinions that

⁶⁴Ibid., 56.

⁶⁵For a fuller picture of Condorcet’s convergence-oriented approach, and its relationship to Rousseau’s concept of perfectibility, see Michael Sonenscher, “Sociability, Perfectibility and the Intellectual Legacy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” *History of European Ideas* 41/5 (2015), 683–98.

⁶⁶The reference study of Condorcet’s social mathematics remains Keith Michael Baker, *Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics* (Chicago, 1975). On probability science and political arithmetic in this period more generally see Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference* (Cambridge, 1975); Andrea Alice Rusnock, *Vital Accounts: Quantifying Health and Population in Eighteenth-Century England and France* (Cambridge, 2002).

⁶⁷Nicolas de Condorcet, “Reception Speech at the French Academy” [1782], in Condorcet, *Selected Writings*, ed. Keith M. Baker (Indianapolis, 1976), 5–7.

⁶⁸These included “the constitution of tribunals, the form and nature of legal proofs, the laws relating to missing persons, financial operating relating to loans and taxation on unequal and contingent revenues.” Condorcet, “Reception Speech,” 21–2.

⁶⁹Ibid., 18–19.

⁷⁰See, for instance, the laudatory remarks in Nicolas de Condorcet, *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain* (Paris, an III [1795]), 261–2.

informed their policy proposals. According to Condorcet, they had also failed to apply mathematical calculations to their investigations “with enough caution or knowledge.” This had led them to assert their views in too dogmatic a fashion, he claimed, and overzealously present “their science as comprising all the principles necessary for social happiness.”⁷¹ A more considered application of mathematics to issues of public concern could yield fruitful results, Condorcet believed, but only on the condition that an adequate distinction was made between facts and opinions, or the constant and the variable, in morality and politics.

Despite his epistemological caution, Condorcet came to present his mathematical science of morality and politics as a tool for wide-ranging social regeneration. Having penned a study applying the calculus of probabilities to collective decision-making processes in the 1780s, he developed this view in several ways in the early years of the French Revolution. In the first instance, Condorcet envisaged that mathematical calculations could be employed to help establish a new system of social welfare. As he explained in his pamphlet *Sur les caisses d'accumulation* (1790), there existed great disparities in citizens' ability to provide for themselves and their families when they reached old age, or when, for whatever reason, they were unable to work, and this reflected the difficulty many wage earners had in putting aside savings.⁷² To curtail the impact of these disparities, Condorcet proposed the creation of social insurance schemes, ideally funded by the state, which would remain solvent by using probability calculations to determine life expectancies, thus ensuring a sustainable balance between revenue and expenditure. Properly implemented, this would to “lead to the establishment of something that has never existed before,” Condorcet announced hopefully, “a rich, active and populous nation without the existence of a poor and corrupt class.”⁷³

Along with helping to establish social insurance schemes, Condorcet also came to envision his mathematical science as a democratic social science, for the use of potentially every citizen. As he alluded in his report at the Legislative Assembly in 1792, probability calculations could be used in a range of fields relating to public policy, but they could also serve to enlighten individual conduct. In the heated political context that followed the trial and execution of Louis XVI in early 1793, Condorcet published a short essay that then expanded on this view.⁷⁴ In tune with his earlier remarks, he suggested that probability calculations could be employed by both policy makers and individuals to acquire more certainty about their actions and opinions. Condorcet also stressed that what he now called *la mathématique sociale* should not remain the purview of just “a few adepts,” but that it should become “a common and everyday science” used by anyone who

⁷¹Condorcet, “Reception Speech,” 27–28.

⁷²Nicolas de Condorcet, *Sur les caisses d'accumulation* [1790], in *Œuvres de Condorcet*, ed. A. Condorcet O'Connor and François Arago, 12 vols. (Paris, 1847–9), 11: 389–403. For his earlier study see Condorcet, *Essai sur l'application de l'analyse à la probabilité des décisions* (Paris, 1785).

⁷³Condorcet, *Sur les caisses d'accumulation*, 402. On these schemes see Sonenscher, “Sociability, Perfectibility and the Intellectual Legacy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” 692–4. See also Gareth Stedman-Jones, *An End to Poverty? A Historical Debate* (New York, 2004).

⁷⁴Nicolas de Condorcet, “Tableau général qui a pour objet l'application du calcul aux sciences politiques et morales,” *Journal d'instruction sociale* 4 (1793), 105–28, 6 (1793), 166–84. This short-lived publication, it is worth noting, was cofounded by Condorcet, Sieyès, and Julien Duhamel.

wished to ascertain the credibility of facts or to predict the likely consequences of their conduct.⁷⁵ At a time of intense upheaval, Condorcet emphasized that the diffusion of mathematical, and especially probabilistic, reasoning could contribute to the convergence of citizens' capacity for enlightened and rational decisions, and thus serve to stabilize social and political relations.⁷⁶

Condorcet went into hiding shortly after his essay on social mathematics was published in June 1793, under threat for protesting against the adoption of the Jacobin constitution. He would nonetheless open one final vista onto this branch of social science in *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, published posthumously in 1795. Conceived as the introduction to a much larger work, the *Esquisse* outlined the history of human progress and retraced what Condorcet took to be the various innovations that had contributed to this progress, as well as the various obstacles that had stood in its way. In the tenth and final section of his work, composed in late 1793, Condorcet famously set out conjectures about the future of humanity and suggested that the diffusion of the principles of the American and French Revolutions, combined with the development of international trade and commerce, would lessen inequalities both between and within nations and further the spread of European civilization worldwide.⁷⁷ Although these conjectures have sometimes been described as "utopian projections," Condorcet himself presented them as the outcome of a probability forecast; that is, as an extension of his social mathematics.⁷⁸

Condorcet spelled out the theoretical basis for his conjectures at the beginning of the tenth section of the *Esquisse*. Having described historical developments up until the late eighteenth century, Condorcet declared that, just as it was possible to predict phenomena in the natural world "with almost complete assurance," when their general laws were known, so it was possible to predict "the events of the future" on the basis of the events of the past.⁷⁹ Echoing his earlier claims at the Académie française, he insisted that the study of human society possessed the same degree of certainty as the natural sciences. It was thus no fantastical undertaking, he claimed, "to sketch, with some pretense to truth, the picture of the future destiny of the human species on the basis of its history." Condorcet nonetheless cautioned that the results of such an inquiry should not be attributed a degree of certainty superior to that which could be afforded "by the number, the constancy and the accuracy of one's observations."⁸⁰ Despite their visionary character, Condorcet presented his future-oriented conjectures as consistent with the applied probability theory of his social mathematics. From this perspective, Condorcet's account was neither utopian nor fanciful; it was merely the picture that followed from a calculation of humanity's likely fate.

The last and ultimate product of Condorcet's social mathematics brought out the measure of the ambition behind his social science. It also further underscored the difference between his and Sieyès's approaches. As discussed, the science of society,

⁷⁵Condorcet, "Tableau général," 4 (1794), 118.

⁷⁶For a more detailed account see Baker, *Condorcet*, 330–42.

⁷⁷Condorcet, *Esquisse*, 327–85.

⁷⁸Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge, 1979), 20.

⁷⁹Condorcet, *Esquisse*, 327.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 327–8.

for Sieyès, was primarily for the use of legislators, and it sought to harness human divergence to further the advent of the “representative system.” For Condorcet, the branch of social science he termed *la mathématique sociale* could help to shape policy decisions, such as those involved in creating a new social welfare system. In its most complete form, however, it could supply rational predictions at both the micro and macro levels—of the fate both of individuals and of humanity as a whole. If the principle at the heart of Sieyès’s social science was the division of labor, the one that underpinned Condorcet’s was human perfectibility. It was because the course of history was witness to a gradual process of improvement, as Condorcet sought to show in the *Esquisse*, that it was possible to foresee the convergence of individuals’ intellectual capacities in time and, more broadly, the continued progress of the human condition. Human perfectibility was, in this sense, the constant or general “fact” on which all the variables of Condorcet’s social science rested.⁸¹

Condorcet’s social mathematics was a long way from Mirabeau’s *science sociale*. This reflected, in part, the reversal in their evaluations of the concept of a science of society. It was also the product of the shifting perspectives on historical time that underlay the successive iterations of the term *science sociale*. For Mirabeau, the ill-fated policies that this science aligned with needed to be substituted with a system that followed the moral and economic arrangements of the first society. For Sieyès, social science pointed to the need to reconcile the constitution of the state with the organization of modern economic life. For Condorcet, the diffusion of both *la science sociale* and social mathematics among the public promised to foster widespread moral and intellectual regeneration, and thus contribute to the universal perfectibility of the human species. All three versions of social science were connected to visions of a happier, more prosperous, and more just society, but each was informed by a different mode of historical temporality: from one that was shaped by the social forms of a mythical past, to one focused on the prevailing norms of the present, to one, finally, that looked to the auspicious developments of an ever-perfecting future.

Coda: a new history

As the strands of thought examined in this article demonstrate, the term *science sociale* was born out of an attempt to reckon with the crisis of the eighteenth-century French state, and it was a crisis to which social science, in its initial definition, was seen as closely connected. Embedded in the nexus of moral and philosophical concerns that animated the works of Quesnay and his followers, the term was initially linked to policies that had fueled greed, luxury, and public debt across Europe, and thereby paved the road to economic and political collapse. The phrase *science sociale* then reappeared in the early years of the French Revolution, but the evaluations with which it had originally been associated were reversed. From Mirabeau to Sieyès, social science was transformed from a negative

⁸¹For his definition of human perfectibility see Condorcet, *Esquisse*, 4–5; Nicolas de Condorcet, “Fragment de l’histoire de la Ire époque,” in *Œuvres de Condorcet*, 6: 290–95. On the concept of “general facts” see Sonenscher, “Ideology, Social Science and General Facts”; Richard Whatmore, “Everybody’s Business: Jean-Baptiste Say’s ‘General Fact’ Conception of Political Economy,” *History of Political Economy* 30/3 (1998), 451–68.

descriptor to a term denoting a type of normative knowledge that pointed to the need for sweeping political renewal. From Sieyès to Condorcet, the term shifted again, and, in conjunction with *la mathématique sociale*, came to describe a science of morality and politics potentially for the use of one and all. Divorced from its original meaning as a science of failed experiments, social science came to be associated with hopeful premonitions about a perfected time to come.⁸²

A complete and detailed history of early French social science remains to be written. But by beginning this history in 1767, rather than 1789 or 1838 (the year Auguste Comte coined the term *sociologie*), it becomes easier to see that this science was enmeshed with continuously reworked agendas of moral, political, and economic reform. An exhaustive account of this history would nonetheless need to pay close attention to the many thinkers who reconfigured *la science sociale*, both as a term and as a concept, after Sieyès and Condorcet. A range of theorists devised normative models of social science after the French Revolution, drawing on but also substantially revising the future-oriented approach outlined in Condorcet's *Esquisse*. The various lines of influence between late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century versions of social science—the role played not only by Condorcet's paean to progress and his concept of “general facts,” but also by Sieyès's theory of the division of labor, not to mention the reflections of the Physiocrats on modern social and economic arrangements—have not so far been fully explored. What is clear, however, is that this story is not one of gradual advancement. Before sociology, there were many versions of social science.

Acknowledgments. An earlier iteration of this article was presented as a paper at the George Rudé and Society for French Historical Studies conference in 2020. I would like to thank the Alison Patrick Memorial Scholarship for providing financial support to participate in that conference. I would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers, along with the editors at *Modern Intellectual History*, for their feedback and comments on the initial version of this article.

⁸²Condorcet's version of social science was, in this way, closely connected to the new form of historical consciousness that took root across Europe in the aftermath of the French Revolution. On this broader development see Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York, 2004); François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York, 2015).