Introduction

It is the second year of the first French Republic. Terror reigns. A nobleman hides in Paris. While henchmen are out to get him, he restlessly works on a sketch of the progress of the human mind. Three hundred fifty years earlier, an Italian architect had come up with a new method of pictorial representation while contemplating the baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence. In this text, I argue that these two events can be linked. And by linking them, one can illustrate two things: the emergence of the modern concept of development and the characteristics of current development practice.

By *modern concept of development* I mean development in the transitive sense, the attempt to actively develop someone or something other than oneself. More precisely, I refer to the efforts to develop less-developed countries by means of international aid programs. This understanding of development is applied throughout the entire book. It is not to be confused with intransitive development, which describes autonomous development that comes from within a social organism.

Transitive development is probably the most future-oriented, secular idea of our times. It is based on a unilinear concept of time and history, on a belief in unlimited progress for all, and on the optimism that deliberate and calculated measures in the present will allow poorer societies to enjoy in the future the same standard of living that we currently do. Another characteristic feature of transitive development is that it divides the world into two opposite groups: the developed and the underdeveloped. Both travel on an identical path of linear progress but are situated at different

points on it. Those at the front have the ability and therefore the duty to aid those who lag behind—with capital but especially by knowledge transfer through experts. Transitive development is a transnational endeavor. Furthermore, although some societies might be considered developed, development is an open-ended process. They can always develop further.

Ever since the idea of transitive development entered the international policy arena after World War II, different schools of thought have disagreed passionately about which concrete measures or policy approaches would best lead to development. Yet the features of transitive development just mentioned have never truly been altered. They probably seem indisputable to most of us. They seem to belong to a tacit understanding, to a mind-set in which they lie firmly embedded. This mind-set is, to use Erwin Panofsky's terms, a "mental habit," a "principle that regulates the act" (1951: 21). The "development mind-set" certainly must have come to the fore long before the idea of development manifested itself in its current form.[1] How this development mind-set came into being is what I investigate here.

My hypothesis is that the development mind-set was the direct result of a *linear perspective worldview*. What I mean by this is that the artistic device that was invented in Renaissance Italy and that allows three-dimensional objects to be drawn with geometrical correctness on a flat surface—as shown in Figure I.1—evolved into a holistic worldview, into a Weltanschauung, or "global outlook of an epoch" (Mannheim [1921] 1952: 34). Once this worldview had emerged, it gave rise to the development mind-set.

In the *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (*Sketch of a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*), written in 1793 by the Marquis de Condorcet, the French esquire mentioned previously, we find a sentence that marks the birth date of the development mind-set I am talking about. The sentence reads, "But the moment will doubtless arrive in which . . . *we* will become for *them* useful instruments or generous liberators" (Condorcet [1795] 1988: 268; emphasis added).

The clear distinction between "we" and "them" is decisive. Needless to say, Condorcet refers to the civilized and the less civilized when he argues that the first will automatically become the liberators of the latter. But if one exchanges the terms *civilized/uncivilized* for the terms *developed/underdeveloped*, one could argue that the development mind-set as we know it today was already fully in place around the year 1793: Condorcet starts from the idea that social processes can be rationally interfered with through general plans. His analysis is based on a secular, linear concept of time and history and on a clear idea about what would happen in the future. The final stage of progress is envisaged to be so far away that it will probably never be reached, yet humanity irrevocably moves forward

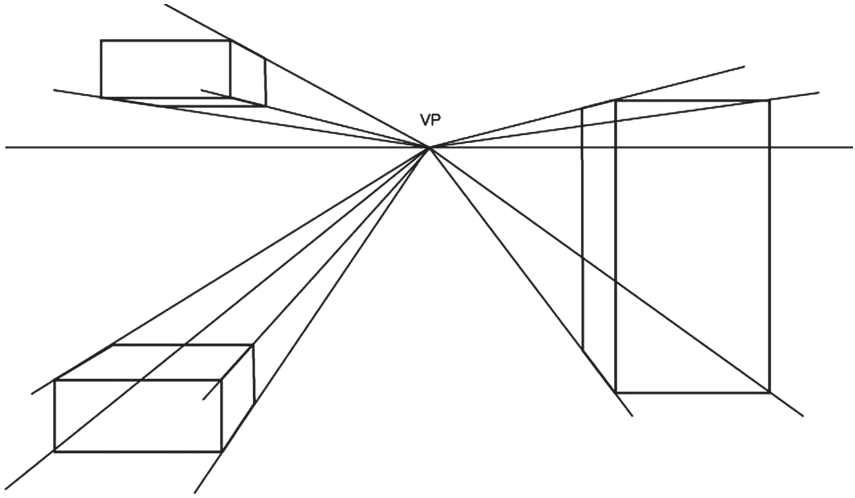

Figure I.1 Linear perspective.

toward it. But most importantly, humankind should take proper actions so that progress is accelerated and the "*others*" can thereby become like "*us*." So if one looks at the historical reasons for the emergence of the development mind-set, the inquiry I undertake could be reformulated as an answer to the following two questions: Why Condorcet? Why 1793?

Usually, historical analyses of development highlight the influence that the period *following* the French Revolution and the Enlightenment has had on the appearance of the modern idea of development. Comte's positivism, Darwin's evolutionary biology, Spencer's theories, the British colonial policy of the Dual Mandate, and the French *Mission Civilisatrice* are important elements of this narrative. For me, however, the concepts of progress and civilization are not so much the *origin* of the idea of development, but rather mark the *end* of a decisive change in European thought that has seldom been connected with the rise of the development mind-set and that I consequently wish to highlight. In my view, this change began with the invention of linear perspective in art and found its epitome in the French Enlightenment and its most striking example in the publication of the *Esquisse*.

This reference to the linear perspective is not as far-fetched as it may initially seem. In 1927 Erwin Panofsky argued in his famous essay "Die Perspektive als 'Symbolische Form'" that the use of perspective symbolized a specific and novel approach to space, mathematics, and infinity. Not only did linear perspective allow for a first, albeit artistic, conceptualization of the idea of space; it was, above all, the notion that space was defined by

geometry, that every object painted adhered to clear mathematical rules and could be precisely measured, that marked the beginning of a crucial cognitive change in Western thought. Panofsky held that perspectivist thought also paved the way for the process of secularization and ultimately allowed humankind to believe that the world could be actively transformed. Although this view is not unanimously shared by art historians (some of whom would like to reduce linear perspective to a mere technical tool),[2] recent scholarship (Belting 2008a; Edgerton 2009) has highlighted again how important the use and invention of linear perspective "was and still is to the uniqueness of our Western Civilization" (Edgerton 2009: xv).[3] I share this latter view.

I do not claim that an unequivocal, direct, and monocausal link exists between the artistic device of perspective and Condorcet's thoughts and writings. Nor do I suggest that the artistic method of perspective was the expression of a coherent worldview from the beginning. My point is that perspective, or better perspectivist thinking, eventually became a worldview. In other words, the worldview expressed by Condorcet *can be interpreted* as the final cognitive endorsement of the metaphorical elements attributed to linear perspective and their application to the real world. To describe how Condorcet came to represent a decisive new way in European thinking, I find it helpful to hypothetically define his position as the endpoint of the interval in which perspective evolved from an artistic method into a worldview. This transformation was not deliberate. But with all due caution, it was not wholly coincidental either. Perspective did influence this historic process of mental change, but it was of course not the only cause of the evolution of the worldview under scrutiny.

Perspective, then, is above all a facilitating metaphor that allows us to explain a complex historical process. It offers a uniquely coherent framework of analysis with which to elucidate why Condorcet came to view the world as he did. But it does more than that. The focus on perspective as a thematic framework also permits us to illustrate the workings of modern development practice and some of its shortcomings. It sheds light not only on a historical process but on current debates as well. This combination is what gives the allusion to perspective such special significance.

My analysis starts from the observation that the idea of transitive development is based on a mind-set that in turn is based on a specific worldview. A worldview is characterized by its universal ambition and can thus be expressed in many different forms. One of them is through art. Thus, trespassing into art history can illustrate and help clarify a general mental frame and thereby complement insights won with the tools of social science.

In any case, perspective has always been more than just an artistic device. Its use was long perceived as an open threat to political power holders and religious authorities. Later, it was also seen as a symbol of Western

superiority. Moreover, few ideas and concepts have turned out to be such powerful metaphors and to shape so much of our thinking and rhetoric as perspective does. "As we try to articulate a thought, to 'plot it out,' to 'map' its contours, we are 'drawn' toward perspectival metaphors. Any opinion is a 'standpoint,' a 'point of view'; we 'approach' problems; we 'draw parallels' or speak of the 'convergence of ideas'; we 'project,' 'measure,' 'survey,' and 'sketch' continuously. Every thought, to the degree that it is our own possession, contributes to our 'perspective'" (Elkins 1994: 29).

But most importantly, linear perspective has lastingly defined the way we literally view the world. The method intentionally gave the impression of looking out through a framed window into the world. It put the observer of the picture in the superior position of the world's overseer. This visual conditioning provided confidence in being able to understand and change the world. The term *Weltanschauung*, literally translated as "view on the world" and usually applied in a rather inflationary manner, is probably best used in this context of linear perspective.

Another important but related metaphorical element of perspective is that it can visualize a linear path to the future. It can represent the trajectory that humanity will follow as well as the role that humankind plays in this process. In the sphere of art, it exemplifies our belief that the future is not uncertain and mystical but directed toward a specific secular goal. With my interpretation of the *Città Ideale*, the ideal view of a Renaissance city painted by an unknown artist at the turn of the sixteenth century—it is on display at the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin—I attempt to make this point sufficiently clear.

Linear perspective was transformed into a full worldview in the centuries following its invention because of subsequent innovations in philosophy and science. These, in turn, were in some instances inspired or influenced by perspectivist thought. Condorcet lived in a time when it was believed that the physical world around him was finally disenchanted by science and mathematics. But the crucial point for our discussion is that he also disenchanted the future. Only in the late eighteenth century had it become possible to believe in a future that would be secular, free from any religious expectations of salvation. This was the moment that saw the emergence of ideals such as liberty, democracy, universal human rights, progress, and civilization. Humanity was seen as progressing automatically toward one of these secular idealistic goals—just as the orthogonal lines in perspective converge toward the vanishing point on the horizon. Moreover, it was believed that this progress could and should be accelerated by deliberate actions.

Condorcet, himself a mathematician, played an important role in the taming of the future by scientific means. So it comes as no surprise that he should be one of the first philosophers claiming to be able to trace out

the logical path toward the goal of the perfectibility of humankind. It is no coincidence that it is only at this moment, when not only the present but also the future seemed "controllable by calculation," that Condorcet turns his attention toward "*them*" or the "*others*" and articulates that they should be helped to catch up on the path toward a future paradise—especially by outsiders who teach "*them*" the "*truths*" of reason and science. This idea could not have been conceived before. Only once the linear perspective worldview had been fully internalized was Condorcet able to use it as a basis from which to derive the modern development mind-set.

As stated, my analysis not only attempts to show the emergence of the development mind-set and to argue that it is based on a linear perspective worldview. I also intend to highlight the degree to which this worldview is still prevalent in contemporary development aid. One of the major and recurrent criticisms of development practice has been the expressed "*rage de vouloir conclure*," as Albert O. Hirschman has called it, the overconfidence of the experts in international development institutions in their ability to solve all problems. Development aid is still usually given and executed by outside professionals who believe they have a better overview of what remains to be done than the locals do—and who believe themselves to be in a position comparable to that of the observer of a linear perspective painting. This can then result in the implementation of projects that may make sense from the outsider's perspective—but not necessarily from that of the local insiders. As this outside imposition of ideas and projects has been criticized in one form or another ever since—William Easterly's analysis is just one recent example—I propose that the persistence of this overconfidence and the resulting practice can also be attributed to the specific worldview underlying development. My interpretation gives hints why the work of development experts has taken its characteristic form.

Incidentally, the use of perspective "not only altered how we represent what we see but how we actually see a priori" (Edgerton 2009: 6). The perspective worldview had its most direct expression in the French Enlightenment, of which Condorcet's notion of progress is a striking example. The idea of developing the underdeveloped nations through large and comprehensive schemes devised in the offices of large development institutions in order to transform these countries in accordance with some ideal is a remnant of Condorcet's specific form of rationalism. Maybe it is the last surviving form of this specific philosophy, just as development or the end of world poverty could be understood as the last existing social utopias after the demise of communism and socialism. There can be little doubt that underlying development aid, often executed as a gigantic experiment in social engineering, is the firmly based idea that the progress of humankind can be "controlled by calculation." This extreme form of

French Enlightenment thought was never universally accepted, not even by Condorcet's contemporaries. As I show, the arguments raised against the perspective worldview (and against perspective itself) can also give some clues about the endurance of the "*rage de vouloir conclure*" and how difficult it is to change it.

I do not wish to engage in some form of postmodernist deconstruction by identifying a contingent narrative that underlies development that, in turn, could be blamed for all its faults. First and foremost, I want to further an understanding of the emergence of the development mind-set. My analysis starts from what is done in development policies and how it is done and tries instead to understand why this has become so. Even if development policies and the underlying development mind-set are based on a linear perspective worldview, this does not automatically imply that development projects invariably have to go wrong. Some may, some may not. I have simply observed that the critical arguments about why development projects have failed have been repeated over and over again and that the persistence of some apparent structural faults of development activities can be explained by their embeddedness in a specific worldview and mind-set. John Maynard Keynes famously declared that "practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist" (Keynes [1939] 1973: 383). I believe it to be worthwhile that those in modern development aid, who often also believe themselves to be exempt from any historical influence, become aware that their actions are based on the mind-set formulated by a defunct eighteenth-century French philosopher, which in turn grew out of a linear perspective worldview.

This book has three parts. In the first, I cover linear perspective in art. I describe the history of the invention of perspective and its underlying philosophical and scientific foundations and metaphors. In the second, I illustrate how the elements of linear perspective became part of Western philosophy and science and eventually contributed to the formulation of a specific worldview best exemplified by the writings of Condorcet, who was to expand it into something I have come to call the development mind-set. In the third part, I spell out how my analysis can contribute to a better understanding of current development aid and its shortcomings. I provide hints as to an alternative approach to development practice—one that is not based on a strict linear perspective worldview and takes into account the role of mutual learning and nondominating forms of knowledge transfer as necessary elements.

The text follows a specific argument over a long period and covers a large number of subjects. As it is not an attempt to rewrite, for instance, the history of modern science, some issues have received slightly less attention than others. This includes the chapters on the history of modern

science as well as the reference to the *Encyclopédistes* or to Romanticism. These topics could all have been more thoroughly extended, but to make the main argument I have felt that enough has been said on them.

My historical reconstruction of how the development mind-set came into being is itself told in a linear, chronological fashion in the first parts of this book. Obviously, there are always counterarguments and counter-currents to any process, including the linear perspective worldview. Due attention to the critical reactions to perspective and the linear perspective worldview are given in the fourth part to counterbalance any impression that uncritical linearity reigned in the emergence of the development mind-set.