Introduction

Adam Ferguson was born in 1723 in the village of Logierait, Perthshire, on the border between the Scottish lowlands and highlands. His father was a Presbyterian minister, his mother a distant relation of the dukes of Argyll. The young Adam excelled in Greek and Latin and became an avid reader of the ancient authors. Like other contributors to the Scottish Enlightenment, his thought was shaped by his Presbyterian background and classical education; but what made him an unusual Enlightenment thinker was his acquaintance with the Gaelic-speaking society of the highlands. The first-hand and early encounter with both 'raw' clansmen and 'polished', anglicized lowlanders was a formative experience in his life.

At the age of sixteen Ferguson went to the University of St Andrews. After taking his MA degree in 1742 he began preparing himself for the ministry and moved to the University of Edinburgh. There he joined a circle of young divinity students who were similarly on their way to becoming clergymen, scholars and men of letters. Among them were the future preacher and professor, Hugh Blair, the future playwright, John Home, and the future historian and principal of the University of Edinburgh, William Robertson. These men were to become part of the Edinburgh kernel of the Scottish Enlightenment.

Edinburgh in the early 1740s was a place of tension between rival political powers and competing ideas of national identity. Scotland had joined England in a Union of Parliaments in 1707, forming the United Kingdom of Great Britain. The Union agreement, which dissolved the Edinburgh parliament, terminated Scotland's long

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history of political independence. It also guaranteed Scottish acceptance of the Act of Settlement (1701), which conferred the English and Scottish crowns on the Protestant Elector of Hanover, displacing the House of Stuart whose main branch had become Catholic. The first four decades of the Union were marked by mounting Scottish discontent, often channelled into support for the exiled Stuart dynasty. Jacobitism, the attempt to rally round the heirs of the dethroned James VII and II, was a blend of political and religious loyalties with personal hopes and material ambitions. It was spurred by widespread dislike of English arrogance and for the methods, perfected by Walpole, of governing Scotland from London by remote-controlled 'management'. With all its stirring rhetoric of political freedom, the parliamentary monarchy which emerged from the Glorious Revolution could seem a remote and abstract structure from the Scottish perspective.

A long-brewing disquiet in the highlands and a new spell of hostility between Britain and France sparked the final and most spectacular Jacobite attempt to seize power. In August 1745, propelled by reckless bravado, personal charisma, promises of French support, and false hopes of mass mobilization in Britain, the 'Young Pretender' Prince Charles Edward Stuart landed in western Scotland and launched a rebellion. His final defeat at the battle of Culloden came only eight months later. It was preceded, however, by a march of his hastily assembled army of highlanders into an ambivalent and flustered Edinburgh.

One of the reasons for the Jacobite failure was that the majority of Scots, most clearly in the lowlands, had a great deal to lose from the overturning of the political status quo. They were essentially satisfied with the Union, and took at face value its promises of economic prosperity, political liberty and cultural sophistication. Educated lowlanders, in particular, were proud of their membership of the British state. In their view, the Glorious Revolution had created a free and virtuous polity unlike any other in Europe; the Act of Settlement had ensured its continuation, and the Union of Parliaments had allowed Scotland to join it. Toward the middle of the eighteenth century, the much-heralded economic benefits of the Union were beginning to emerge in the form of growing manufacture and accelerated trade with Britain's colonies. Men like Ferguson and his friends, Presbyterians and Whigs by education and con-

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viction, had little or no sympathy with the exiled Stuarts. Still less did they aspire to the traditional, autocratic, Continental-style monarchy associated with the Jacobite programme.

Although Jacobitism was not a political option for the likes of Ferguson, some of its emotional triggers were deeply felt even by its opponents. Scotland was a proud and ancient monarchy which had become – by the agreement of its own élite – a political periphery. Its court and royal family had, indeed, moved to London with the Union of Crowns in 1603, but political independence ceased with the Union of Parliaments of 1707, when Scotland joined England to create a new British state. By that time there was a great deal to gain from entering the Empire, and loss of political autonomy was mainly symbolic. The problem, and challenge, for the heirs to the Union was to sustain Scotland's unique traditions and cultural resources within Great Britain, in a fast-changing economic reality, and in a language fit for London and purged of Scotticisms.

The '45' was, for many educated lowlanders, a passing episode of political anachronism. Future generations were to treat it as the epic final throes of a lost Gaelic world, the subject matter of nostalgic narration epitomized by the novels of Walter Scott. By contrast, the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, many of whom had witnessed the upheaval first hand and from a Hanoverian viewpoint, developed a more complex view of Gaeldom and Jacobitism. These themes found their way into their universal models of mankind's advance and into their explorations of social and political variety. And yet, with all their scientific detachment, the Enlightenment authors were not exempt from the particular cultural sensitivity which haunted post-Union Scotland.

Ferguson himself was not in Edinburgh during Charles Edward Stuart's stormy sojourn. Unlike his friends, he made an early turn into the world of affairs. He reportedly acted for a while as private secretary to Lord Milton, who managed the affairs of the powerful Scottish statesman, the Earl of Islay. Proceeding with his studies, Ferguson was soon offered a speeded ordination and a military post. He was to serve as deputy chaplain to the Black Watch, a regiment of highlanders recently formed and ready to join the British forces in Flanders. With Jacobitism rife in the highlands, Gaelic-speaking officers of unfaltering Hanoverian loyalty were in urgent demand. It is highly questionable whether Ferguson took up his post in time,

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as some biographers tell us, to participate in the battle of Fontenoy in Flanders, valiantly wielding his sword against the triumphant French troops. At any rate he evidently did well, rising to the post of principal chaplain in 1746 and remaining in service for nine years.

Ferguson thus began his adult life as a soldier and as something of an ideologue. He was, as was expected of him, a politically minded preacher. One of his sermons in Gaelic was so warm in its denunciation of the House of Stuart, the Pope, and France, that a Scottish duchess, the mother of his commander, had it translated into English and published at her expense. Yet, as some of his contemporaries testified, Ferguson felt more at home on the battlefield than in the pulpit. He remained in the British army for some nine years, and was proud throughout his life of his military experience: not only did it help him to write a history of Rome, it also touched a deep chord in his self-image as a man and a Scotsman. More than any other thinker of the Scottish Enlightenment, Ferguson was to insist on military valour as a cornerstone of civic virtue.

Ferguson left both army and church ministry in 1754, while retaining both his military commission (until 1757) and his ordination (he acted as a Kirk elder during the 1760s, and possibly later). The cessation of active service was perhaps due to disappointment of his hopes of obtaining a clerical 'living' from his benefactor, the Duke of Atholl. Significantly, he did not return to Scotland right away, but remained on the Continent for over a year longer. We are told that he acted as tutor to a Scottish law student, identified only as 'Mr Gordon', who studied first at the Dutch university of Groningen and then at Leipzig. The Saxon nobility, as a letter to Adam Smith conveys, struck Ferguson as pompous and boorish; not so his landlord Eléazar de Mauvillon, a Protestant convert and French translator of Hume's *Political Discourses*. In his cosmopolitan home, Mauvillon gave his Scottish lodgers a glimpse into the world of the European Enlightenment.

When Ferguson returned to Edinburgh in 1756, his own biography already reflected some of the encounters and contrasts which inspired the Scottish brand of Enlightenment. The most obvious was the unresolved tension between Scots and Scots. In the aftermath of the '45 the highlands were paying a terrible price for the Jacobite misadventure and for years of governmental neglect, while

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lowland Scotland was embarked on a route of economic growth and cultural ferment. The philosophers David Hume and Adam Smith, Ferguson's friends, were creating a new theory of progress based on good laws, commerce and social refinement. Ferguson's view was more ambivalent: in the highlands he found a living Scottish tradition of military might and communal bonds. While for many educated Scots the highlander was an alien 'other', an embarrassing remnant of a bygone age, Ferguson's experience began to suggest that the rude clans had effectively preserved values which modern society had, to its detriment, lost.

A different sort of 'other' facing the Scots were the English – the land, the people and to some extent even their language. During the 1750s and 1760s the Edinburgh literati found several ways to place a Scottish bid for equal standing, and creative input, within English culture and the British state. Ferguson was a central figure in the Select Society, a debating club of noblemen and scholars founded in 1754, which discussed current affairs and ideas. Along with the moderate divines William Robertson, Alexander Carlyle and Hugh Blair, he defied Presbyterian traditionalists by supporting the theatre production of *Douglas,* a play written by their friend the Reverend John Home in 1756. Ferguson wrote a pamphlet in its defence, gently evoking his countrymen's fear of cultural inferiority. The theatre, he argued, can teach virtue better than any other public amusement; and it has always been present 'in every civilized and polished nation' (*The Morality of Stage Plays Seriously Considered*, Edinburgh, 1757, p. 22). The *Douglas* affair had a mixed outcome: religious bigotry was successfully combated, but the complex of provincialism held sway; Home's play, contrary to the hopes of its promoters, did not foretell the rise of a Scottish Shakespeare.

Literary ambition next focused on the young poet James Macpherson and his alleged translation of the poetry of a mythical Celtic bard, Ossian. Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland* were published in 1760, with a preface by Hugh Blair. With the publication of *Fingal* (1761) and *Temora* (1763), the Edinburgh literati hoped that they were presenting the world with a Scottish Homer. The soft elegiac tone of the Ossianic poetry had a true and timely ring in the age of sensibility and refinement, and the poems were well received. Here, too, Ferguson was a key figure: his Gaelic background lent credibility to the pro-

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ject, and he was later forced into an awkward and defensive exchange with the English collector of ancient poetry, Thomas Percy, one of the first critics to accuse Macpherson of fraud.

These cultural skirmishes lent fervour to Ferguson's most cherished cause, the Scottish militia. For many Scots the creation of a citizen militia, which parliament made legally impossible after the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, was not only a question of effective defence against what seemed an impending French menace, but also a matter of asserting Scotland's loyalty and her standing within the political union. Yet English suspicion of dormant Jacobitism proved too strong: the militia acts passed in parliament in 1757, and again during the American war, pointedly ignored the Scots.

Ferguson was a central figure in the militia agitation. He founded, and probably named, the 'Poker Club', which was established in 1762 to 'stir up' the militia issue. His pamphlet, *Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia* (1756), focused the problems which occupied his Scottish contemporaries and run through his own later works: is economic strength compatible with traditional public virtue? Can a nation, in his words, 'mix military spirit and commercial policy'? Can it afford not to combine the two? The militia campaign sharpened the distinct Scottish concern with the compatibility of the social quests for wealth and for virtue. It failed as a political cause; but, largely thanks to Ferguson's work, this was an exceptionally fruitful failure.

Such local exercises in cultural politics would have been of little significance had they not been anchored in deeper philosophical ground. The confrontations of lowlands Scots with what they conceived as Gaelic traditions and with English modernity were conducted in the broad context of the European Enlightenment, to which Scotland contributed a distinct national voice. For literate Scots, continental Europe did not lie 'beyond' England: it was, in some senses, closer to home than England. Scotland had a long tradition of special ties to the Continent, both political and intellectual. The 'Auld Alliance' with France and the Calvinist ties and long-standing links with universities in Germany and the Netherlands made Scottish scholars especially attentive to the intellectual developments in northern Europe.

The European contexts suggest that the distinctly 'Scottish' element in the Scottish Enlightenment was not an indigenous cul-

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tural tradition (of the sort that inspired Burns' ballads and Scott's historical novels), but rather a recurring sense of intellectual urgency. There was a powerful motivation to create a feasible philosophy for the new Scotland, but the materials for this philosophy were by no means indigenous: they came from the political thought of classical antiquity, the modern tradition of Natural Law, and the European literature of travel and ethnography. The main concern of Lord Kames, John Millar, Robertson and Ferguson, as historians and theorists of society, was to create categories for the explanation of material, social and economic progress. The 'rude' highlands could be fitted into a stadial account of civil society, but so could contemporary Great Britain: no historical stage was less 'natural' than the other, and Scotland's entrance into the Union could be understood in terms of civil and economic advance. The sociological insight gleaned from a study of the highlands was no less crucial for the identity of an educated dweller of Edinburgh than the poetry of Ossian.

Scottish thinkers were impressed by the modern theory of Natural Law expounded in the works of Hugo Grotius and Samuel Pufendorf. Most effective was the latter's account of the emergence of property as a key social institution, and his theory of economic progress from primitive communities to sophisticated commercial societies. The development of legal and political systems, Pufendorf argued, was informed by patterns of production and trade. Pufendorf's stadial theory of human advance was taken up not only by the Scottish jurists, but also by Scottish historians and theorists of society. It served as the backbone for their narrative of progress in law, politics and the arts. Technological sophistication and commercial activity, these thinkers pointed out, were defining features of modern society.

This concept of progress was enriched by the works of Montesquieu, whose direct impact on Hume, Smith and Ferguson was of vital importance. Montesquieu contributed to Scottish theorists not just his typology of governments, but also a powerful justification for a modern type of political freedom. Montesquieu's novel concept of freedom was developed in parts of his *Persian Letters* (1721) and *Spirit of the Laws* (1748). The freedom which rests on economic progress, social refinement and a well-balanced constitution, he argued, could ultimately replace the freedom of the classical repub-

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lic, whose chief resource was its virtuous citizen-soldiers. It is on this point that Ferguson's famous tribute – 'when I recollect what the President Montesquieu has written, I am at a loss to tell, why I should treat of human affairs' (p. 66) – should be taken with a grain of salt. Ferguson, unlike Hume and Smith, did not follow the French mentor all the way in trusting the structural firmness of the modern, commercial state.

The idea of the modern polity as a society resting on solid political institutions, freedom from governmental encroachment, and individual accumulation of wealth, acquired further coherence from another source. Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1714) suggested an appealing type of historical causality, one which could explain why self-interested actions of private individuals, bent on accumulating wealth, could amount to increasing comfort and liberty in the public sphere. Moreover, it provided a justification for the replacement of political virtue with time-tested institutions. Both the growth of these institutions and the beneficial outcome of individual selfishness could be seen as the fruit of subtle historical mechanisms. Political and economic progress was grasped as an accumulation of the unintended consequences of numerous human actions: that, for a modern mind, was part of its beauty.

The unique relevance of this set of ideas for post-Union Scotland was promptly recognized by the Scottish thinkers. They regarded themselves as members of a modern society well placed to experiment with a new kind of commercial and constitutional liberty. Smith, in particular, developed a theory of progress based on his country's gain in economic improvement at the price of sovereignty. In Hume's masterly hands the new political approach sparkled with scientific certainty: 'So great is the force of laws, and of particular forms of government', he wrote, 'and so little dependence they have on the humours and tempers of men, that consequences almost as general and certain may sometimes be deduced from them, as any which the mathematical sciences afford us' ('That Politics may be reduced to a Science', 1741).

This stance signalled a departure from an older concept of political freedom, stemming from the Renaissance revival of classical republicanism. The older concept rested on an active citizenship in a closely knit political community. It was modelled on the ancient Romans, and inspired especially by Cicero and the Stoic school.

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The great early modernizer of classical republicanism was the Florentine Machiavelli in his *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, completed in 1519. In the seventeenth century, as J. G. A. Pocock has shown, Machiavelli's ideas were brought to bear on English politics by several writers, primarily James Harrington. The civic tradition challenged monarchical autocracy in its insistence on the participation of public-spirited, property-owning citizens in the defence and government of their country. This set of ideas proved especially relevant to Scotland on two occasions: the debate preceding the Union of Parliaments in 1707, and the militia agitation in the second half of the eighteenth century.

In his study of the transmission of republican ideas from Renaissance Florence to England, Scotland and America, Pocock has drawn attention to Adam Ferguson's position as the 'most Machiavellian' of Scottish thinkers. Ferguson was by no means the first: civic rhetoric was used by the Union sceptic Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, who employed republican terms to assert Scotland's position as a political community of citizens. Ferguson, born into the Union and not averse to it, found Fletcher's language useful for a modified political quest. He was deeply convinced of the importance of a Scottish militia for the moral and social cohesion of his countrymen within the British state.

The civic tradition was encumbered, however, with a moral philosophy which was fast becoming obsolete. Echoing the Stoics, it regarded luxury and 'effeminacy' – the mental corruption of the powerful – as the vices naturally threatening the simple and manly virtues of the active citizen-soldier. Etymology mattered to the civic thinkers: virtue, they claimed, cannot be divorced from virility. Being 'polished', as Ferguson reminds his readers in the *Essay*, has to do with being political; being 'civilized' involves acting as citizens. When the words lose their original meanings, the values they denote are threatened by corruption; when the *polis* is no longer supported by the *vir*, it is doomed to sudden defeat or to slow, sordid decline.

Yet, as the Scottish thinkers would readily admit, the modern senses of 'politeness' and 'civilization' had new power of their own. Delicacy, sensibility, even luxury, were aspects of an advanced civil life which in some crucial ways surpassed the classical models. The traditional republican discourse had no answers for the new respect-

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ability of wealth and social refinement, which eighteenth-century Scots came to associate with the modern age. A choice had to be made: the civic values had to be radically adjusted to the new ethics of sociability, commerce and freedom under the law; or else new proof was required for their relevance to the modern state.

David Hume, and more decisively Adam Smith, chose the first of these solutions. Adam Ferguson opted for the second. Public-spirited citizenship, he insisted, was indispensable even in the best of modern polities, namely Great Britain. Ferguson's notion of corruption was not that of a Stoic: the real moral danger in modern times, he said, was not wealth but political laziness. He made a point of conceding that luxury was in every epoch relative, and that riches and material well-being did not in themselves cause or imply moral degeneration. It was precisely the prominence of economic activity in modern society which encouraged the well-to-do, in particular the land-owning classes, to stay out of politics, and therefore out of virtuous life. What matters, then, is not the wealth amassed by members of society, but the retaining of their political personae: a trader, a craftsman or a 'man of the world' must never cease to be a citizen. This reworking of the civic creed was Ferguson's distinct philosophical voice in the Scottish Enlightenment.

This voice was developed along with his academic career, which matched the intensity of his social and political involvement. In 1757 Ferguson succeeded his friend Hume as Keeper of the Advocates' Library. He then worked as tutor to the sons of the Earl of Bute, shortly before Bute rose to brief political prominence. In 1759 Ferguson was appointed to the chair of natural philosophy (physics) at the University of Edinburgh. A more suitable appointment followed in 1764, when he proceeded to the chair of pneumatics (philosophy of the mind) and moral philosophy. As a teacher and a thinker he now came into his own. His first major work, the *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, appeared three years later.

The *Essay* met with immediate acclaim, in London as well as in Edinburgh. It had a wide readership, especially in the three decades following its publication. Together with Ferguson's second book, *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (1769), it made its author famous throughout Europe. The *Essay* was hailed by men of letters as diverse as Boswell, d'Holbach and Jacobi. The ageing Voltaire congratulated Ferguson, who visited Ferney in the mid-1770s, for 'civi-

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lizing the Russians': his works were being used in the University of Moscow, as well as in many other places of learning. Ferguson was admired by Herder and Hamann and stirred the soul of the Romantic poet Novalis. Seven editions of the *Essay* appeared in Ferguson's lifetime, and there were other reprints and unauthorized editions. Places of publication included Dublin, Basle and Boston. A German translation appeared in Leipzig in 1768, and a French one in Paris in 1783.

Among the few who disliked the *Essay* was David Hume, one of Ferguson's kindest friends. Hume had praised an earlier work by Ferguson, an 'Essay on Refinement' compiled in 1759 but subsequently lost, as a promising draft for a great book. When the *Essay* appeared, however, Hume could barely conceal his disappointment. The reason for it is not entirely clear. Mutual friends supposed that he found the book too enthusiastic in its moral prescription: Blair described the *Essay* in this context as 'rousing and animating'. Hume may have seen it as too 'Scottish', both in spirit and in terminology. His courteous disapproval was the first of several hints that Ferguson was steering away from a main current in the Scottish Enlightenment.

As Ferguson's Scottish contemporaries could not fail to note, the *Essay* was a bid to reclaim the idea of civic virtue on behalf of the modern, commercial state. In its use of political language, as we will later observe, the book is polemical, and at times subtly subversive. Every aspect of its title – the author's ideas of history, of society, and of what 'civil' is about – reflects a debate involving Ferguson's intellectual mentors and colleagues. It conveys an attempt to come to grips with the ideas of the natural jurists, Montesquieu and Mandeville, and to shift their combined significance into a course different from the one taken by Hume and Smith.

It would take an informed reader, though, to trace these signals of dissent. The majority of readers did not see the *Essay* in the context of a Scottish debate; Scotland was the *Essay*'s hidden source of insight and urgency, but it was not its subject matter. The book deals with questions which concerned Enlightenment thinkers throughout Europe: the nature of political society, differences between nations reflecting temporal and geographical variations, patterns of progress and decline, types of government and the tension between 'private' and 'public' man. The *Essay* is an enquiry

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into the material and moral progress of societies, clearly inspired by Scotland's condition, yet not reliant on the Scottish case. Its focal question is about the place, and the replaceability, of civic virtue in the modern state.

The book begins and ends with men and their political nature: 'It is in conducting the affairs of civil society, that mankind find the exercise of their best talents, as well as the object of their best affections' (p. 149). Society, for Ferguson, is made of men who compete, fight, interact and rise to challenges. Human nature in the *Essay* is synonymous with playful, aggressive masculinity. Ferguson's theory of government and political community is wholly reliant on this psychological premise.

It is difficult to see the moment in time when Ferguson claims that society became 'civil'. In the most important sense, it always was. In a second sense, that of permanent institutions, civil society evolves from an early 'savage' phase of primitive tribes and transient military leadership to the 'barbarian' phase in which property is established, along with durable patterns of government and social hierarchy, or 'subordination'. The foundations of civil society, however, are communal bonds and public virtue, which are older than property. Ferguson would not subscribe to Rousseau's famous dictum, in his *Discours sur l'inégalité* (1755), that the first appropriator of land was 'the real founder of civil society'.

Despite his reiteration of the stadial theory of human advance, Ferguson's prime concern was with forms of government and political community, not with modes of production and the growth of trade. In the *Essay* he candidly confessed that he was neither 'conversant' with nor 'engaged by' economic theories of progress. A footnote added to the fourth edition (1773) alerts the readers to Adam Smith's forthcoming *Wealth of Nations*, 'a theory of national economy, equal to what has ever appeared on any subject of science whatever'. Yet the same passage appeals to Smith and the other economists 'not to consider these articles as making the sum of national felicity, or the principal object of any state' (p. 140).

The essential point here is that, as a political community of men, civil society was always there; and that some of its essential features are not a matter of progress. Ferguson's obvious *bête noire* in the opening section of the book is Rousseau's speculated non-social state of nature. The state of nature, he responds to Rousseau, is

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'here'. That 'mankind are to be taken in groups, as they have always subsisted' (p. 10) was no great innovation: Ferguson merely voiced the conviction of many eighteenth-century theorists, and of all his Scottish contemporaries. After this piece of straightforward polemic, Ferguson could move on to more complex ground: is 'civil' akin to 'refined'?; how does mankind advance 'from rudeness to civilization'? Is this advance, as some contemporaries suggested, self-perpetuating and ultimately irreversible?

On these matters the *Essay* is polemical in subtler ways. Ferguson's concept of human advance does not append moral improvement to progress in technology, production and wealth. He vehemently opposed the idea that enhanced morality, in the shape of an increasingly sophisticated system of justice, was an offshoot of the economic march onwards. He could not accept that a polity might become a self-regulating system of transactions among self-serving individuals. The modern commercial polity was not in itself a bad thing, as long as its citizens retained their interest in public life and avoided the temptation – and the cunning philosophical justification – of a selfish private life.

There is, moreover, no point in distinguishing the sphere of commerce from other aspects of public life. Society cannot be detached from its form of government, nor can economic man be torn, in practice or abstraction, from political man. There is a crucial difference between Ferguson's 'civil society' and the German equivalent, 'bürgerliche Gesellschaft', which gained new prominence and a new meaning during Ferguson's lifetime. It is important to point out that Hegel's distinction between 'civil society' and 'state', between a private sphere of trading and socially interacting individuals and a public sphere of government and law, was profoundly alien to the civic tradition. The fact that Hegel read and used Ferguson's work, and that it was Ferguson's *Essay* in its German translation which helped to make the notion of 'bürgerliche Gesellschaft' fashionable in German scholarly circles, is one of the ironies pervading the history of ideas.

Ferguson's civil society is the polity itself. It has a 'history' in more than one sense. As a universal category, society moves through historical phases, from 'savage' to 'barbarian' and on to 'commercial' and 'polite'. But society is also an array of forms occurring in different epochs and geographic settings. Ferguson was intrigued, like

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other writers in the age of discoveries, by the simultaneous existence of disparate societies (or 'nations', a synonym not committed to linguistic or cultural distinction) in varying states of progress and of mutual awareness. Yet Ferguson was not tempted to arrange these societies along an ascending moral scale, a unilinear process of civilization crowned by modernity. Unlike his contemporaries Voltaire and Hume, he believed that even highly developed societies are in near and clear danger of retreating into barbarian despotism, a phase far more despicable than simple, egalitarian savagery. Unlike his readers Hegel and Marx, he was not concerned with demonstrating that mankind moves along a preconditioned course towards an elevated future. Ferguson's history is indeterminist and open-ended. His good polity is not a theoretical artifact projected into a dim future, but an imperfect reality: the Spartans, the early Romans and the modern Britons have all enjoyed a taste of it. No philosophy can bring it about, and no system of laws can guarantee its upkeep without constant civic alertness. A good citizen must be restless, and a robust polity mildly turbulent.

The six parts of the *Essay* offer a narrative of growth and decline which is by no means based on a 'strong' circular model of history. The first part, 'Of the General Characteristics of Human Nature', lays out Ferguson's premises with regard to 'man as a member of society'. Manly, virulent exertion appears in all 'the multiplicity of forms . . . which different societies offer to our view' (p. 65). The next two parts, 'Of the History of Rude Nations' and 'Of the History of Policy and Arts', attempt to impose some order on this multiplicity by depicting the stadial advance of nations. This is, however, no simple narrative of progress: Ferguson methodically alerts his readers to the immanent tension between material progress and moral advance. The ultimate explosion of this tension – the moral problem latent in polished, commercial society – is the book's crescendo. In the three last parts – 'Of Consequences that result from the Advancement of Civil and Commercial arts', 'Of the Decline of Nations' and 'Of Corruption and Political Slavery' – Ferguson explores the evils which polished societies may encounter and must confront.

The escalating moral tenor of the work is reflected in Ferguson's wealth of references to ancient and modern authors. Half way through the book, modern ethnographers such as Charlevoix and

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Lafitau begin to make way for the Roman chroniclers of the twilight of civic virtue. The final parts of the *Essay* were written with ancient Rome in focus, but with modern Britain in mind.

Ferguson saw in eighteenth-century Britain a uniquely endowed, a well-advanced, and in many ways a good polity. He did not share Hume's favourable view of absolute monarchies, and fumed against the Prussian autocrat Frederick the Great for ridiculing British justice. Yet for all his pride in the English constitution, Ferguson did not see it as a self-sustaining device. Britain's political freedom, he feared, was on a possible collision course with its commerce and refinement. All of these were a painfully reversible achievement. The liberty afforded by the Habeas Corpus Act 'requires a fabric no less than the whole political constitution of Great Britain, a spirit no less than the refractory and turbulent zeal of this fortunate people, to secure its effects' (p. 160). Modern Britons will keep up this zeal so long as they do not follow the ancient Romans and 'plead a fatality, which, at least, in the breast of every individual, is dependent on himself' (p. 264).

This rejection of historical determinism did not prevent Ferguson from using complex models of causality. He did not think that everything in civil society stems from conscious individual action. He was, in fact, one of the most original contributors to the Scottish theory of unintended consequences: 'Like the winds, that come we know not whence, and blow whithersoever they list, the forms of society are derived from an obscure and distant origin ... and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design' (p. 119). Yet the author of these lines was more reluctant than any of his Scottish colleagues to let the mechanical beauty of such processes lull him into a false trust in the inevitability of progress.

As Karl Marx was quick to note, Ferguson (along with Adam Smith) was also one of the first authors to recognize the benefits and dangers of the division of labour. Ferguson saw specialization in manufacture as one of the most fascinating patterns of unintended consequences of human acts. 'By the separation of arts and professions, the sources of wealth are laid open' (p. 173). But when specialization invades the spheres of government and defence, when statesmen and soldiers become professionals rather than citizens, it helps 'to break the bands of society, to substitute form in place of

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ingenuity, and to withdraw individuals from the common scene of occupation, on which the sentiments of the heart, and the mind, are most happily employed' (p. 207). This critique was a poignant reminder that not all unintended processes yield beneficial results. Yet Ferguson was no reactionary, and did not long for bygone ages and simpler methods of manufacture. He was willing to condone the assembly-line economics of the modern state, as long as its politics and its army remained, so to speak, manually operated by responsible amateurs.

This interplay of modern political economy and classical republicanism required careful and imaginative use of language. The vocabulary of the *Essay* merits attentive reading. It is rich with concepts and terms which had a significant future, partly thanks to the success of the *Essay* itself. The very first passage of the book features the word 'civilization' in one of its earliest occurrences. Another eye-catching word is 'conjecture', used several times in the opening section to explain the way in which Ferguson reconstructed historical processes. This usage may have inspired his pupil and successor Dugald Stewart to coin the term 'conjectural history' for the particular brand of historiography associated with the Scottish Enlightenment. The same section of the *Essay* also makes use of the phrase 'multiplicity of wants' (p. 13) in a sense close to the one later elaborated by Hegel. Whether Marx was impressed by the truly pioneering use of the term 'superstructure' (p. 159) is itself matter for conjecture. 'Civil society', although redefined by Hegel, has remained associated with Ferguson's name.

Ferguson could not foresee these future developments of his turns of phrase. He did, however, tackle fashionable words of his day in ways which were deliberate and often tongue-in-cheek. He attacked 'the grimace of politeness', ridiculed 'the boasted refinements . . . of the polished age', and showed how corrupted nations 'generally flatter their own imbecility under the name of *politeness*' (p. 242). At the same time, he attempted to subvert the modernity of such terms by stressing the ageless virtues of active life, 'a refinement, which every boy knows in his play, and every savage confirms' (p. 48). Taking the offensive, he sought to revive the political roots of the modern concepts 'polished' and 'civil' (p. 195). He deftly deconstructed Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* by drawing the line beyond which any comparison between 'the establishments

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of men' and 'the artifices of the beaver, the ant, and the bee' is no longer useful (p. 173). The *Essay* can thus be read as a battleground of eighteenth-century political idioms.

It was certainly read, by British contemporaries, as a political book. Some influential readers felt that its author had the makings of a statesman. He had several near entries into public service: in the early 1770s he was considered for a parliamentary commission set up to investigate the British rule in India. This plan did not materialize, and neither did the reported intention of Lord Shelburne, an admirer of the *Essay*, to nominate Ferguson for the governorship of Florida. The outbreak of hostilities in America, which aborted the latter plan, opened a different channel for political action: Ferguson returned in 1775 from a tour of France and Switzerland in time to play a part in the American crisis. The position he took marked the limits of his republican creed.

In February 1776 the radical moralist Richard Price published his controversial tract, *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America*, in which he supported the rebels. Ferguson's response, *Remarks on a Pamphlet lately published by Dr. Price . . .*, was published at government expense in 1776. Ferguson was sympathetic to the colonists' complaints against the government's economic policy, but strongly denounced their use of violence. Civic participation, he observed, is not a goal to be achieved at all costs: 'Corrupt and vicious men, assembled in great bodies, cannot have a greater curse bestowed upon them, than the power of governing themselves' (*Remarks on a Pamphlet*, p. 2). Although the colonists had not yet displayed blatant corruption and vice, supporting their war against Britain was simply a bad historical wager. An American victory would undermine a sound and fortunate nation in favour of a dubious new experiment. 'Is Great Britain then to be sacrificed to America . . . and a state which has attained high measures of national felicity, for one that is yet only in expectation, and which, by attempting such extravagant plans of Continental Republic, is probably laying the seeds of anarchy, of civil wars, and at last of a military government . . .?' (*Ibid.*, p. 59).

In the spring of 1778 he was asked to accompany the Carlisle Commission sent to negotiate an agreement with the rebels. The

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commission was a failure. Ferguson, acting as its official secretary, was denied passage to present its case to Congress. A 'Manifesto and Proclamation' for which Ferguson was at least partly responsible, inviting individual representatives to negotiate separately with the Commission, badly misfired. Early in 1779 Ferguson returned to his Edinburgh chair and to the life of a scholar. He was left with even less sympathy for the American rebels than at the outset of the crisis. In this political mood he rejected an appeal for support made by Christopher Wyvill, the leader of the Yorkshire Association which agitated for parliamentary reform. Rebuffing a radical campaign for prompt enlargement of constituency was not out of line with Ferguson's cautious restatement of classical republicanism. It seemed wiser to be circumspect towards a political movement which was rocking the already shaky British boat in the wake of the American war.

Ferguson's reputation continued to grow. It was enhanced on the Continent by the *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* and a later university textbook, *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (1792), both translated into several languages. In Britain and America, by contrast, Ferguson's fame rested primarily on his *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (1783), which went into several editions and reprints and gained the esteem of such readers as Edward Gibbon and John Stuart Mill. Americans valued the book's powerful emphasis on Rome's republican heyday. In Britain, however, the *Roman Republic* aided Ferguson's decline by providing him with a simplistic image and epitaph. Contemporaries and posterity came to view him as the fiery, likeable 'Scottish Cato', an increasingly quaint moralist of stout but old-fashioned Stoic convictions.

Ferguson resigned from teaching in 1785, and lived to a very old age with his mind wide awake. He travelled again through Europe and gained honorary memberships of learned academies in Berlin, Rome and Florence. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars were for him not only deeply exciting events, but also gratifying vindications of the choice of subject matter for his life's work. With a great measure of sympathy for the Revolution's spirit, if not for its style, he followed the civic, imperial and martial drama to its apex and end. His eldest son, Adam, returned from French captivity shortly before Ferguson's death in 1816.

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Ferguson's posthumous significance is no simple story. On the Continent, and especially in Germany, his works made a more lasting impression than in Britain. For over a century after the publication of the *Essay*, German scholars made distinct and creative uses of some of Ferguson's ideas: Schiller was enthralled by his ethics and possibly by his concept of play; Hegel was inspired by his historical narrative; Marx credited him with the prognosis of the division of labour; and Sombart hailed his pioneering sociology. Significantly, none of these readers was concerned with Ferguson's concept of civic virtue.

Readers of the *Essay* today would hardly consider its author as 'our contemporary'. Ferguson lived in a world in which 'Americans' were native tribesmen, 'citizens' were select and exclusively male, and 'war' could imaginably pass for a good thing. Other components of his language and thought have aged more gracefully, and some of them have hardly aged at all. The central thesis of the *Essay* has indeed re-surfaced with new relevance in the last few decades. It is a moralizing thesis, far removed from the pretence to 'value-free' sociology, and deeply suspicious of grand theory. It calls attention to the importance of political responsibility and civic alertness, and to the dangers of blind reliance on laws and institutions, man-made or 'natural'. It points at the subtle seam between what is unintentionally self-regulating and what is wilfully attempted in history. No matter how much we pin this concern to the contexts and contingencies of Scotland in the late eighteenth century, it has remained timely.

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