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HISTORY AND THEORY IN FERGUSON'S ESSAY
ON THE HISTORY OF CIVIL SOCIETY
A Reconsideration

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as you have stated the Question, 'tis not about what was First, or
Foremost: but what is Instant, and Now in being . . . . You go (if I
may say so) upon Fact, and would prove that things actually are in
such a state and condition, which if they really were, there would
indeed by no dispute left. [Shaftesbury. The Moralist]. As for the
Performance itself, it is but an Essay. [Edward Ward]

It has become a scholarly commonplace to portray the
social and political thought of the Scottish Enlightenment as founded
upon a theory of historical stages. Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, John
Millar, and others are thought to agree that a social and political
theory appropriate to their own times must begin with an understand-
ing of the natural history of civil society and a conception of their own
situation as determined by basic features common to all societies at the
same stage of development. The features thought to be basic are eco-
nomic: each stage is defined by a distinctive mode of securing subsist-
ence and by arrangements and habits somehow corresponding to this mode.
Smith's political economy, Ferguson's political philosophy, Millar's
jurisprudence are, accordingly, to be read as dependent on the more

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comprehensive theory which defines their society as commercial and therefore polished and civilized. In such treatments, Ferguson is sometimes distinguished as being more or less hostile to modern society, without being able to project a coherent alternative. In any case, the primacy of a socioeconomic theory of historical development appears clear, and the theorists seem to merit the label coined in a pioneering study by Roy Pascal, "The Scottish Historical School."¹

There can be no question that the conception of historical stages plays a part in the writings of the Scottish Enlightenment. What is far less clear is that it plays the same part in all the writings or that it plays the part of fundamental comprehensive theory in any of them.² To answer such questions, it is necessary to look afresh and without anachronistic distortion at the actual structure of the various intellectual productions. Such reconsideration reveals that the uses of such history vary, even in the diverse works of a single author, and that there were profound epistemological and moral reasons against the sort of proto-positivist or proto-Marxist social theorizing too readily ascribed to these thinkers as a group. The case to be considered in this study is Adam Ferguson's Essay on the History of Civil Society. It is meant to be illustrative and not to lay the basis for a new general interpretation of the school. Ferguson himself treats the problems to be identified differently in the lectures to his moral philosophy class and in his other published writings.³ With regard to the Essay, it would be more accurate to say that Ferguson wrote to counteract a new theory of history than that he made it his major objective to have such a theory accepted.

Ferguson can only be understood in relationship to David Hume and Adam Smith. Most of the subtle insights into psychological and social theory to be found in their works, including Smith's periodization of history, constitute his donnée. They are facts whose accuracy he rarely challenges. He hopes to transform their meaning and force by putting them into a different context. In the textbooks and lectures, this operation depends in good measure on scientific methods adapted from Reid. In the Essay, however, the techniques are more commonly rhetorical and dialectical. Ferguson embarks on a complex strategy for revising the "state of the question" with regard to moral and political matters; any changes he makes in the account of facts and of the principles which govern them must be seen to relate to that wider strategy.⁴

This paper will consider how Ferguson managed the contrasting but interdependent qualities of man as a creature of natural social history
and man as moral actor in the Essay. The paper presupposes the current interest in the uses of history in political philosophy, as well as the general judgement that what Ferguson and his Scottish contemporaries said about these matters enters importantly into the genealogy of the contemporary state of the question. Consequently, I will not reopen questions about Ferguson's merits or originality. Nor is this the place for reconsidering Ferguson's place within the social development of Scottish culture. It is an important feature of the reconsideration to be undertaken, however, that it will proceed without emphasizing the social roles presumably played by Ferguson or the social functions presumably subserved by his writings (except insofar as Ferguson himself raises these issues), and speculations on these points were central to the interpretation the last time I tried to make sense of his work. This reflects a revision of my views about the requirements of theoretical self-consciousness.

II

Ferguson's interpretation of social and political life in the Essay on the History of Civil Society has it as its central objective to show that civilized society can be apprehended as a scene for worthy actions and that full citizenship in a modern state implies active engagements. The major task is not so much the exhortation to worthiness and activism, although that plays a part, but the presentation of circumstances as hospitable to action, if properly interpreted, as sufficiently ordered to provide a context, so that what is done will have meaning and will secure recognition from others for the doer. Ferguson finds weighty facts which militate against such a reading of the situation. Some have been stressed by those who compare modern men and manners with classical excellence and see only corruption and decline. Other pertinent facts have been discovered by writers who believe that modern society renders obsolete, and that modern knowledge exposes as hypocritical and unnatural the maxims of conduct found in the old texts. Ferguson cannot be simply classed with civic humanist pessimists or with historicist progressivists. In one of the last lectures to his class, in the spring of 1785, Ferguson quoted the maxim from Horace, "Quod petit est hic" (what you require is here), and then explained that by hic is to be understood "Not the place merely, but the scene such as providence opens for
us. And the part of a mind wise, courageous, and beneficial in any scene." The theme of place, elaborated into the *topos* of scene-and-part, governs Ferguson's life-long attempt to find within the present a theatre for action, for some men at least.

These preoccupations are already to be found in the earliest records we have of Ferguson's intellectual life. Two documents from that time will serve to introduce the *Essay*. When Ferguson was 22 years old, and only halfway through his divinity studies in Edinburgh, a patroness secured his designation as Deputy Chaplain to the First Highlands Regiment of Foot. In the autumn of 1745, then, he found himself encamped with the troops in Flanders, and he wrote a first letter home to his brother. Ferguson explains that he had not kept his promise to write from London because he "could do nothing orderly" in a "great place" where one is always in a "great variety of mixed company" who are talking in the most entertaining but confusing way about the most elevated matters of state. "You or I may go into an eating house," he wrote, "sit at what board, join what company you will, and talk familiarly with people who neither know you nor one another, and whom perhaps you never will have another sight of." The contrast to this in Ferguson's mind appears in the opening sentence of the letter: "Were you in your old place, and I at my old corner of the table, I could tell you a great many stories and adventures." There seem to be two kinds of places, then. In London, one is carried along in a compelling and entertaining pattern of behavior, but one is spectator even while taking part. At home, one can perform in a consequential way. That Ferguson could "do nothing orderly" in that "great city" is important; but it is equally important that he did not therefore condemn it, but rather described it with great relish and considerable social insight. To understand this feature of the text, it is necessary to move to the next for purposes of comparison.

A sermon to his regiment, published early the next year, takes the theme of place from the familiar to the public realm, concerns action in its purest form, and has no relish for disinterested descriptions of the place held to be improper. According to the title page of the published English text, Ferguson had spoken in Gaelic to the Highland troops, encamped near London, on a fast day appointed to solemnize the fight against the Jacobite invaders who had crossed into England. His text is 2 Samuel X.12, "Be of good courage, and let us play the man for our people, and for the cities of our God." Most of the sermon consists of familiar Whig contrasts between the lawful, protestant, happy estab-
lishment of Hanoverian rule and the tyrannical ambitions of men beholden to Rome and to France, who deem men "by birth, the property of man." He avoids civic-humanist themes, to speak of peace, civil liberty, laws, and worship, and to ask, "are not our laws duly executed and our persons and properties secured? The happy effects of which administration we behold in that peace and independence, which prevails in every part of our country." The opening and closing commentaries on the biblical text, however, are not of this sort, and they parallel the discussion of places in his letter:

By a man's country is meant that society or united body of men, of which he is a member, sharing all the advantages that arise from such a union. Not merely the soil or spot on which he was born, as is too often understood by many. On this supposition, the love of one's country, which has always been esteem'd the most manly virtue might be rejected as a mere whim or prejudice. No; the name of country bears a meaning more sacred and more interesting. It was not for the place of their nativity the Jacob exhorts the Israelites to play the man; it was for their people and for the cities of their God [6]

The practical bearing of this distinction between two places is more solemn than was the case in our earlier example:

If you oppose your own acquaintances, it is to prevent their ruin: if you oppose your own relations, it is to save them and their posterity from slavery forever.[23]

The comparison between places in the letter serves a different rhetorical purpose from the comparison in the sermon. In the first instance, Ferguson adduces the fact that he was in one place rather than another to excuse his failure to act in an orderly way. In the second, he instructs his listeners that they are morally obliged to give their loyalty to those in one place but not to those in another. Both discussions, however, rest on a distinction between a context consonant with actions meeting an ethical obligation and a context indifferent or hostile to them. And the improper places share the qualities of appealing to certain pleasurable feelings without engaging the character of the person who submits to them.

Taking the two pairs of contrasts together makes it clear that Ferguson should not be understood to aim at the sort of distinction between home and city developed by conservatives on the continent and later expressed in the familiar opposition of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft. It is the London of inns and the native Highlands that are at best
geographic, and it is the table at home and the national union which provide members with meaningful places where they can do what is proper. Ferguson's distinguishing principle more nearly resembles those employed in traditional philosophical contrasts between universal or natural forms of association and accidental occasions. The connection between conduct and place is well-established in the tradition which refers itself to Cicero, since the concepts of propriety and citizenship are both dependent on it, at least in part. And the attempt to discriminate between genuine places, embodying principles able to orient conduct, and chimerical, enchanted, or low places which disorder men's behavior, is also well-known. The attributes which qualify a place for one or the other category have naturally varied greatly in diverse theories. Ferguson's simple discussions, however, echo some considerations widely shared.

The political sermon, as might be expected, proceeds in the best-established way. Loyalty to "city and people," properly understood, refers to an association which expresses and serves universal qualities of human nature. Recognizing that this is where he stands renders a man fit for action. The "union", Ferguson maintains, secures property and worship; human nature requires these; all who enjoy the advantages of the union must be understood to submit to its authority voluntarily. But men who heed whims associated with the place where they happen to have been born, and who follow accidental personal connections in these matters, enter upon a course which brings the confusion of anarchy or the insolence of tyranny. They must be understood to have been confused into enlisting in a campaign whose character is hidden by the machinations of its sponsors. While the liberal political standard of universality Ferguson applies derives from Locke and Hutcheson, the general structure of the argument parallels Aristotle's distinction between the polis and perverted political settings, as well as the many comparable designs in the literature of Western political thought.

The situation depicted in the letter to his brother, however, can hardly be taken in the same way. The contrast between places found there, it will be recalled, serves much less weighty moral purposes: Ferguson uses description and explanation to excuse failure to perform as promised with regard to a trivial matter. Conversation—or, in this case, letterwriting—is not inherently trivial; but here the ethical content was slight and external and the brother might well declare himself more than compensated by the amusing letter he received a few weeks late. The
slightness of the moral occasion seems to justify a different attitude toward the situation said to inhibit action.

I want to designate that attitude as the attitude of the spectator, and contrast it with the attitude of the actor. The relationship between agent and spectator plays a vital role in Smith's moral philosophy, and the philosophical literature since Kant has assigned complex meanings to the terms actor and spectator and to the relationships between them. I shall follow what I take to be Ferguson's own usage, without attempting to locate it in relation to the others, except to say that Ferguson seems to have Smith in mind when, in contexts of moral urgency, he uses the term "spectator" as a term of reproach. If the fundamental human situation is that man has a part to play in some scene, the situation can also be viewed from two points of view, that of the actor and that of the spectator. Ferguson takes up Smith's suggestion, I believe, that agents playing some parts may govern themselves by the spectator's point of view. But he reserves that mode of conduct to situations of little moral significance and insists that there is a distinctive actor's perspective which must be developed if men are to act well.

In the letter, Ferguson claimed that he "could do nothing orderly," but he also described his involvement in the eating and talking of the town, and draws on careful observations he must have been making. Are not these orderly activities? Ferguson's apology anticipates a contrast between situations where the choice between right and wrong action is imperative and situations where behavior is determined by forces which cannot be readily resisted by those caught up in them, but which can be observed and described from a distance. The distinction depends partly on properties of the situation itself and partly on considerations external to it which may also affect the agent's part. So, for example, Ferguson would not suppose that a call to duty could have been ignored for the sake of his mealtime occupations, as was his promise to write. In the light of such a weighty obligation, the aspects of the situation described to his brother would fade into insignificance, and his attention would be redirected to more general features—say, that he was not physically restrained.

In summary, places or situations lend themselves to different types of interpretation, depending on their relevance to judgements and actions, as determined either by their structure or by the occasion which moves the interpreter. Interpreters will proceed differently when they comment as spectators (and that may happen by way of explanation for
their own conduct) than when they speak as actors (and that may take the form of laying down law to themselves), and it is a first test of character to select the correct attitude. This decision is prior to the choice internal to the moral actor’s attitude. If the place is one properly examined from a spectator’s point of view, negative moral judgements are not in order. The more the spectator understands, in fact, the more will he appreciate the ultimate orderliness of the divine creation, as Smith commonly does.

But such a long view is inappropriate where the actor’s perspective is required. At the end of a tortured discussion of the question of freedom and necessity, in one of his lectures, Ferguson concludes that our knowledge in these matters must be governed by our inner experiences as subjects of action and authors of judgements. He then asks whether all this may not be part of a larger scheme determined by physical laws of cause and effect, an expression of the order of nature working through the forces of will depicted and experienced by actors. He responds that any such answer would go beyond the study of human nature and relate to God and Providence, and therefore be out of place. “Here,” he determines, “the description ends, and man is intelligent, spontaneous and responsible.”

The contrast between the worlds of spectator and actor help Ferguson define his complex relationship to Hume and Smith. It is central to his strategy for adjusting classical moral and political maxims to the findings of modern philosophical analysis and social science. If situations are such as must be seen as places of action, because of some quality in the situation itself or because of the moral urgency that brings the actor there, the boundaries must be properly stated, the qualities identified which make it actually or potentially appropriate to a moral actor. If, on examination, the situations are not affected with active moral interest for the actor, they are properly viewed from the standpoint of the spectator and then seen as instructive illustrations of the providential order. Men are placed among a congeries of both sorts of situations, and the assessment of any of them may have to be revised in the course of events. Questions of conduct are to be referred to the standards of propriety and civic virtue expressed in the great maxims but effectively present in men of “raised disposition” or they are to be referred to the ways of the world. The work of learning and teaching is above all to situate men, not to convert them. Ferguson presents two sorts of worlds, in interaction and partial interpenetration, each with its characteristic way of charting the places within which men find them-
selves, and both relevant to conduct. But normal human life is lived be-
tween the two, and Ferguson's nonacademic writings seek to hold both
approaches in productive suspension.

The simplifying distinction between the two attitudes which I am
taking from Ferguson and applying systematically to interpret the
Essay does not look to ontological attributes of things. There is some
suggestion that human activities more closely connected with animal
nature are subject to laws more nearly mechanical than activities of
higher cultural worth, and that would suggest that the action vocabu-
lar y might almost never apply there. But in general Ferguson denies that
laws applying to human activities have this character. It is not as if there
were distinct spheres of necessity and spheres of freedom. All human
happenings might in principle be broken down into a complex of in-
stances each explicable by a general law; all may equally be seen as the
actions of many actors, manifesting their character and will. Ferguson is
persuaded that it is morally pernicious and misleading to adopt one or
the other perspective alone. The former drives toward ever higher levels
of abstraction in search of ever higher comprehensiveness and simplic-
ity, and thereby removes the investigator from the actual complexity
and immediacy of things. It also refers actions having contrasting
moral significance to identical laws, and thereby jeopardizes the integ-
rity of moral discourse. He here sets himself against systematic science
of society and philosophy of history. The alternative of universal
morality, which he seems exemplified as much by orthodox divines as
by pessimistic decreers of civic corruption and inevitable decline, has
appropriate failings. Much human conduct appears morally weak or
despicable, if judged as action, because it follows habit, fashion, the
ordinary requirements of professions, and the like. Unless the moralist
concedes that much of this is innocent, to be accounted for by reference
to normal patterns of human life, he will also lose the capacity for
making distinctions that must be made and will dispirit himself and
others, inhibiting the efforts that must be made. 2

There is paradox in an attempt to scrutinize with analytical care the
concepts of lawfulness, causality, freedom, necessity, and the like as
they may be implicit or employed in the Essay, since it is the design of
the work to alter the state of the question so that such philosophical
subtleties do not impede either the appropriation of facts (including
laws) uncovered by modern methodical investigators or the effective-
ness of the great moral maxims. In his textbooks and lectures, Ferguson
does attempt such philosophical analyses; but then the treatment of other topics changes considerably.

III

Karl Mannheim once suggested that liberals differ from conservatives by virtue of the fact, among others, that they think of their fellows as contemporaries associated in a temporal continuum not as compatriots sharing some communal space. That classification scheme will not help with Ferguson’s Essay. As that work proceeds, the significant collective actor proves to be the nation; and the nation is constituted by a complex of relationships, several of which are importantly conditioned by their location in a line of progress, while others are not. There are connections among several of these lines, but they are variable and uncertain. As for the nation itself, its career through time will depend in the most important respects on the decisions of the actors on the scene, and not primarily on any of these lines of progress. That puts in very abstract terms what Ferguson insists must be put much more concretely. To look at any situation from the standpoint of an actor is to encounter a mass of detail, or what he called a “conjuncture of causes.”13 The theoretical knowledge developed from the spectators’ perspective can at most help to direct attention to some factor which might otherwise be overlooked.14 But the penetration and sagacity which distinguishes outstanding men depends far more on the imagination which apprehends particulars than on the understanding which abstracts from these particulars to state general laws.15 The Essay on the History of Civil Society provides a number of heads under which materials relating to mankind can usefully be recorded.

Men find themselves in some state of the progress of the arts whereby they secure subsistence, accommodation and ornament. When they are in an advanced state of those arts, as in Ferguson’s time, they occupy different places within a commercial system which produces great wealth. The term system indicates that this is a complex “partial society” whose principles of interconnection are relatively stable and can be stated in fairly general terms. Individuals each have a distinct profession, with the vast majority compelled for the sake of livelihood to occupy themselves with one of the professions producing material goods. Among the professions is that of tradesman, and his activities
actually bring the diverse other activities into a system. Through commercial exchange, individual producers are supplied with what they want and are able to dispose of their surplus.

A peculiar character of this system or partial society is that its principle of union does not require any of its members to look to a common cause, beyond his private interest. Ferguson points out that the diverse partial societies which are together comprehended within what he calls the "universal confederation" of the nation have diverse principles of intercourse. In one of his lectures, he offers examples of partial societies held together by love, by friendship, by shared fear, by shared interests, and even, in the case of a company of gamblers, by mutual antagonism. The confederacy of the arts, as he sometimes calls the commercial system, fits between the last two of these societies on the scale of social affection among members requisite for existence. Ferguson defers to Harris and then to Smith's *Wealth of Nations* for an account of the laws governing this system, but reserves to his own interpretation questions about the relationship between the system and other factors in the life of the nation.16

Two consequences of the advanced state of the commercial arts connect it with other aspects of life. First, like all circumstances delimiting and directing man's activities, the professions educate and habituate their votaries. They refine certain of the talents to a very high degree and stultify others. Since the various specialized tasks are unequally challenging and since the tendency of the system is to narrow the scope of occupations ever more, as ever more inducements and opportunities arise for intensifying production by particularizing tasks, many individuals will be rendered very limited indeed. This source of inequality combines with another inevitable concomitant of advanced arts, the unequal distribution of property.

Where there are such palpable differences among men as those produced by the radically disparate social education of diverse professions and by the steep inequality of wealth, the scheme of social subordination which is bound to exist will be defined largely by these factors. Ferguson distinguishes this "casual" pattern of subordination from the "political establishment," with its order of offices. Both arrangements play a vital part in society and in the history of the nation. The constitution of power, it seems, is the most important meeting ground for the actors' and spectators' worlds.
Ferguson considers the pattern of casual subordination associated with the commercial system an essential aspect of power in modern nations, but he does not deem a theory of that pattern a comprehensive or satisfactory treatment of power in the nation. It is incorrect to suppose that Ferguson has it in mind to penetrate the appearances of political arrangements to the social power relations beneath. The interplay between the casual and the political patterns of power cannot really be brought within a single theoretical formulation because they are to be comprehended in terms of different vocabularies. There is distortion in seeing the relationship as one where the casual determines the political; there is comparable distortion in talking simply about the ends which political action ought to pursue and the power relationships appropriate to those tasks. The tension between these provides the dramatic action of the Essay.

Similar considerations apply to two other constellations of social factors and partial societies also found in nations, and which should be briefly described before returning to the central political theme. Men find themselves at some state in the progress of literature and science. The former comprises a state of the language, habitual ways of seeing things, accumulations of information, and modes of inquiry. All these will strongly affect what a man can say and what he can find out. In an advanced state, the language is subtle and discriminating, many facts are available, and the techniques of productive science are known. But access to these resources is unequally distributed in society and there is a tendency for the cultivation of knowledge to be segregated within a particular profession, so that it ceases to be a shared social capability.

Related to the state of knowledge as well as to other aspects of civil society are the manners of the people. Ferguson speaks of advanced societies as marked by a general refinement and gentility, especially among the higher ranks. At the same time, there is concentration on private interest incident to the commercial system and a brutalization of the lowest ranks, in consequence of the separation of professions. More generally, Ferguson worries about a dangerous narrowing of aspirations and channeling of ambitions into competition for riches and recognition which tend, in turn, to generate servility and arrogance.

Vital to all the relationships depicted so far are the political establishments. In his writings Ferguson tries several different formulations to express the distinction between the comparatively settled arrangements of the legal and constitutional order, which are like the facts we have already considered, and the "political operations of state," which give
effect to these arrangements and are constantly creating the universal
confederation of the nation. However expressed, there is always special
 provision for the established relationships of rights comprehended by
the system of jurisprudence. As use of the term system in this connection
indicates, the legal relationships, including the powers of officials, are
seen to form an integrated, rule-governed, comprehensible whole. In an
advanced state of the progress of polity, this system will provide security
of personal and real rights, including above all the rights of property
and legitimacy of office, equal protection under the law, and stability
of expectations. Force is a monopoly of the magistrates and any subject
employing it in his relations with others is properly punished to the
extent necessary to repress such occurrences. This condition Ferguson
calls civil liberty.

The active side of politics depends on the constellation of all these
factors, but only it can actually create an order worthy of man. The
central point about Ferguson’s conception of political establishments,
stated from the actor’s point of view, is that they “continue in a state of
gradual formation.” What appears regular and established from the
spectator’s point of view, proves to be something being regulated and in
the process of establishment. Some men, in government and out, must
pursue political purposes, must actively engage themselves to the task
of ordering society in one way or another. That the consequences
of their actions will not conform to their designs doesn’t affect this
point. It is the effects that are wanted, for the sake of their own moral
integrity but also for the sake of political community. Only where some
at least are “citizens” prepared to constitute and will the force of their
community, can there be national felicity. Political establishments in
an advanced state of the arts must work to protect the various partial
societies and to enforce the conventions among them. They must also
protect the confederation as a whole against external enemies.

In the Essay, moreover, Ferguson lays heavy emphasis on the need
for political establishments to act continuously against the abuses in-
cident to polished nations, abuses which can bring about despotic rule
and national decline. Ferguson writes eloquently about the dangers he
sees, and these passages have been most often singled out by comment-
ators. But these materials must be seen in the wider context of his work.
He is writing against what he takes to be fatalism as well as against what
he sees as Epicurean subversion of moral character. His denial that the
modern systems and states, designated by terms like “civilized and
polished,” represent a departure from human nature and entails as
much a rejection of the claim that the career of nations is like the aging of individuals as of the contention that private vices are necessary to such states. At the same time he rejects what he believes to be the view of Hume and Smith, a view he is inclined to associate with Epicureanism, that civilized society as a whole forms a system of necessary relations whose benign operations can only be a matter for speculative and aesthetic appreciation.

The deliberate actions of leading men do in fact produce political consequences that none of them intends. That is because of the contests among them and because of the interplay with circumstances, and this is the stuff of the history of nations. But the events narrated by historians are not identical with the situations analyzed by the speculative spectator. The qualities of will and judgement enter into the former account as they do not in the latter. A technical way of describing Ferguson’s project is to speak of the diverse senses of history he is trying to inter-relate. There is the descriptive or natural history which leads to induction and laws but there is also the narrative history which records and explains men’s deeds. Ferguson wants to work out the relationships between these two sorts of accounts and the aspects of things they respectively discern. Many of his difficulties are already to be found in Bacon’s discussions of natural and civic histories and of the highly problematic connections between them. But this is not the place to explore those antecedents. The main point is to warn against premature conclusions about an integral philosophy of history or theory of social change in Ferguson.

For Ferguson, political judgement is a matter of wise choice between options defined by circumstances. Political events depend on the interacting consequences of the choices made and effectuated by all the powerful political actors. The political world is a world of conflict, not settled lawfulness. Without a will to counter abuses and without active engagements in political actions, outcomes will not be determined by some logic of the situation or requirements of a system, but rather by the will of those who relate to circumstances in a corrupt and exploitative way, or simply by those who are left with the power by the casual operations of things but cannot perform the corrective and integrative tasks which must be carried out if the nation is not to stagnate, decline, and fall.

The warning example is China. Montesquieu had already contested the widely-held view that China is a model of excellence, and he repeat-
edly placed his discussions of China next to his discussion of England, as if to invite comparison between these two opposite ways of managing a society devoted to commerce. 20 He had depicted the rule of emperor and mandarins as despotic, and he had portrayed a society in which all conduct is extorted from people by some ritual or regulation backed by force, except only commercial activity which is spurred on by tolerated dishonesty. Ferguson seized upon Montesquieu's themes of tranquility, self-interest and compulsion; but he dispenses with Montesquieu's physicalist explanation of the case. China shows what becomes of civilized societies when they order their conduct exclusively by the norms appropriate to commercial and related spheres in societies in an advanced state of the arts. Duncan Forbes has already called attention to the fact that the catalogue of objectives Ferguson ascribes to Chinese national character corresponds very closely to David Hume's leading values. 21 According to Ferguson, the terms "polished" and "civilized" confuse judgement when they are taken to refer to proficiency in arts and commerce, scholarship or fashionableness. They refer properly to an effective political condition and citizenship. Even the qualities prized by those who use the terms in the misleading way cannot subsist without political spirit and its effects. 22

Political action must counteract abuses in each of the five spheres of social activity discussed:

(1) If the commercial system dominates all aspects of life and the state makes wealth its sole objective, the state risks destruction by external enemies. The trader has virtues, but they are such as to disqualify him for political rule. A regime of rich, self-interested men also brings the threat of internal social war. The principles of utility which regulate the system of commerce cannot govern a country. 23

(2) The separation of professions can undermine the talents of many in society. In the Essay, there are strong, well-known passages, cited by Marx, in which such consequences for the lower orders are depicted. But for Ferguson, the really serious consequence of specialization affects those who should make up the political class. If those who are exempted from lucrative employments become incapable of effective action, then the prospects are poor. And the separation of professions threatens just such a condition. In addition to this well-known concern about the presumed effects attending the separation of civil and military activities, Ferguson expressed dismay about a tendency for the upper classes to become, in effect, specialists in consumption. 24 In this, as in so
many other things, he is picking up a hint from Montesquieu's chapter on English national character, as well as from the more general political thesis of the *Spirit of the Laws.* Ferguson remarks that a society that makes pursuit of personal fortune the main stimulus to activity appears to provide no occupation for those who "in the vulgar phrase, have not their fortune to make." And Ferguson turns scornfully against cultivated activities which Montesquieu had prized. He says that these men "betake themselves to solitary pastimes, or cultivate what they are pleased to call a taste for gardening, building, drawing or music.... With this aid, they endeavour to fill up the blanks of a listless life," he concludes, "and avoid the necessity of curing their languors by any positive service to their country, or to mankind." 

(3) Correspondingly, a scheme of subordination which grants influence without reference to ability and worth undermines the authority on which all order depends.

(4) Accumulation of learning may turn learned men into "students and admirers" of past learning, "instead of rivals." Then men may acquire the "elements of science" but lack "the enlargement of ability and power which useful knowledge should give." This is a theme to which we shall return in conclusion, because the political response it calls forth includes the *Essay on the History of Civil Society* itself, taken as a "literary transaction of society."

(5) Finally, if orderly political arrangements and civil liberty are taken as finished products, or are taken to require an end to political quarrelling, the admirable institutions themselves lose their political energy and can no longer serve.

Political attitudes and actions can counteract these tendencies by keeping in being a constitution which is not the rule of force. This requires politics as well as patriotism. The contest for command over the force and authority of government Ferguson restricts to men "exempted from lucrative professions." They are to be the citizens in the fullest sense of the word, whether occupying governmental office or place or taking part in the maneuverings of party. And I believe that it is the design of the whole work to encourage those who are already active and, above all, to move those who are not. Beneath the surface of the text is a sustained polemic against the Epicureans and the suggestion that, as in Rome, the doctrine is making some headway among those who should govern. The politicians must constantly counteract the influence generated by "casual subordination," including its effects on themselves. They must enlist the active sentiments of men. And they
must provoke in one another the will and energy to act on the public stage. The political establishment, as noted before, must be constantly established, even though certain forms have been stabilized by treaty among contending parties. Ferguson excoriates the mandarin, depreciates the legislator, and vindicates the statesman who is a party politician.

In the last analysis, Ferguson differs politically from Hume and Smith because he believes that political life is primarily about power and the assertion of will, and only secondarily about property and the satisfaction of interest. Two passages in Ferguson's lecture notes confirm this, while they also provide documentary evidence for Ferguson's constant involvement with the central concepts of those he means to counter. While talking about political establishments as the "results of human art applied to human society," he turned to the "inconveniences" which make it impossible for men to govern themselves only by means of the informal power generated in diverse social relationships and which require political establishments. As numbers of men rise and riches increase, competition intensifies. Then, Ferguson wrote, "The first object of competition is property. The second is eminence and power." The note is corrected in the same hand, to put power first and property second. Political institutions are occasioned by the struggle for power and are designed to render it nondestructive and, in fact, render it a capital social good. A similar revision can be found in the following note:

Amidst parties contending partially for their respective advantages the choice will be determined by the character and interests of those who are in condition to make it.

The word "interests" is crossed out and replaced by "will."

The struggle for power is not seen to have the demonic implications it has for Hobbes because it is not seen to take place in a social vacuum where all is always at risk: the competition arises on the basis of things achieved and relationships established, and the existing systems and structures provide boundaries within which it takes place. That consideration accounts for the great importance Ferguson attaches to the casual subordination of ranks. There is a passive resistance in things as they are that inhibits and cautions the actor without immobilizing him. Political power serves above all, according to Ferguson, to remedy abuses in the casual system or in previously established political establishment. But these serve in turn to provide the limiting scene and deter-
minate place within which the political actor plays his part. It can happen, of course, that political power takes the form of pure force and breaks beyond the limiting conditions to proceed without limit. But that presupposes a corresponding weakening of the social system itself, as well as the failures of the other political actors.

It is in this context that patriotism becomes important for politics. For Ferguson, as for many since Machiavelli, military engagement is the great school for civic virtue, when it accompanies other civil roles. When it becomes the prerogative of a profession, however, it is a great threat to social integrity. The campaign for a citizen militia was Ferguson’s major political cause. More generally, Ferguson treats patriotism as a major enhancement of obedience, a response by citizens to the example of governors. It involves active partisanship during contests with external foes, and it involves attention to the great issues and contests in the political arena. In an important sense, the theatre of politics and the generation of interest in it, are among the major achievements of the political establishment. Ferguson uses the metaphor of the school in this connection. The ordinary man acts politically by virtue of his vicarious involvement in political life, as well as his care for his rights and attention to his business. These political dimensions help to counteract the dangerous effects which attend the advanced state of the commercial arts. Primary responsibility, however, rests on those who are eligible to pursue and to exercise power.

At the conclusion of Ferguson’s last lecture as professor, he warns public men:

But let them beware of the idea that they have obtained their object and may remit their effort. The stone of Sisyphus must not be left to itself at any point on the declivity of human affairs.  

This is striking for its implication that the political task is essentially unchanging. To take Ferguson’s catalogue of problems in civilization as a comprehensive critique of the social system as a whole, and as requiring fundamental social changes which he is somehow unable or unwilling to project mistakes the work. Ferguson usually used the term system to characterize the commercial and legal partial societies. Neither of them is to be eliminated or replaced by something else, and neither is to be understood as anything but an expression of human progress and human adaptability. Ferguson’s enthusiasm for their effects in their own domains is always clearly stated. The point is to make sure that these domains do not absorb all of life. Commercial society is not uni-
que in having problems. All social constellations have defects and abuses. That is what political life, in Ferguson's view, is all about. If it were possible to eliminate the occasions for political action which the problems provide, that step would destroy human happiness, which requires such occasions. For Ferguson, action is always in an important sense counteraction, impelled by ambition for something higher than is possessed at the present. But without something which is possessed, without a particular scene which defines and limits the options and conditions their effects, there cannot be meaning in action. If politics is supposed to change the world in some respects, or to prevent its decay, it proceeds above all by interpreting the world in different ways.

Writing the Essay is itself a political act in this sense. Ferguson seeks to revise the state of the question; he enters the contest about meanings to be attached to some major concepts. Against scepticism and epicureanism, he insists upon ciceronian meanings for terms like civilized, polished, and, above all, happiness. His play upon the ambiguities of the term "history" must be put in the same light. In this respect, he follows Bacon, whom he acknowledges as his master in all matters relating to method.

In The Advancement of Science, Bacon identifies two very different categories of history: natural history which collects and arranges the materials for the new scientific natural philosophy, and civil history, which provides the "foundation" for wise commentary and discourse, to guide private and public conduct. In the one sense, history of human properties and arts assembles materials for a universal theoretical science of human nature; in the other sense, history of human actions provides materials for ruminations to assist judgement. History in both senses can be said to strengthen the knower's command over man's fate. But the one, in Bacon's magnanimous language, lets man bind and fetter nature to his purposes, lets him make things his servants. The other has to do with the management of affairs and activities, with wise counsel and clever stratagems for the government of self and others.

In the Essay, Ferguson exploits these dual possibilities to allow him to claim that he is more scientific than Hobbes or Rousseau or Mandeville, and, implicitly, than Hume and Smith as well, because he begins with natural history rather than building on theories or hypotheses about causes, and to claim, at the same time, that he offers materials more immediately useful to men of affairs, because he encounters with history broadens practical experience and enhances practical wisdom in a way no abstract knowledge, however valid or rigorous, will do. His methodological discussions in his lectures contain major unresolved
difficulties about the way to build theory upon narrative or civil history, as well as about the idea of working from the history of a species rather than assembled individuals, as Baconian method seems to require. The Essay expressly bypasses all such questions. Ferguson combines the scientific and humanist associations of the term, and this renders the matter of scientific theory largely beside the point. The dialectical or simply literary play upon such a word can be allowed in an essay as it cannot in a methodological treatise. Ferguson meant his Essay as a "literary transaction of society," and it was to achieve what Bacon claimed for his own, to "come home to men's business and bosoms."

Ferguson distinguished literary transactions as a fourth class of literary works, in addition to history, science, and poetry. He assigns to it orations, dialogues, moral essays, letters, and the like. The writings of Cicero and Demosthenes, for example, are of this sort, and they "contain statements, representations, argument, and persuasion whether addressed to the understanding or the will. The merit of them consists in understanding well the subject that is in question and in use of proper means to obtain the end of the speaker. . . . The whole is but a kind of transaction that results from the genius of a society that is happily occupied and disposed." For Ferguson to write an essay upon history, in short, is to rival Cicero, the orator and moralist. But the choice of the essay form for this work does not imply a rejection of scientific culture in favor of an anachronistic humanism. The essay embodies a method, but it does not pronounce on method. Like the dialogue and the dramatic poem, the essay allows the writer to hold alternative possibilities in suspension, while moving to a conclusion and achieving an effect at a level different from that upon which the possibilities clash.

A recent commentator has found in certain literary works an anticipation of something which Niels Bohr was to call "complementarity," and this conception better explains what Ferguson's Essay is about than any notion of his anticipating dialectical theories of history. Sigurd Burckhardt writes:

"[Complementarity if a matter] of operating with two mutually inconsistent and several inadequate models because, and as long as, a single, consistent, and adequate model has not been found. Complementarity differs from and is superior to mixing because it remains aware of its 'illegitimacy' and pays the price of choosing one model or the other. It does not pretend to be a solution, hence does not close the road to discovery but on the contrary compels us to take the risk of following it."
Its passionate demand for order forces us to leave the safe prison of a stale, once-for-all picture, to suffer the grief of imperfection and disorder and the joy of genuine action and creativity. Complementarity, in short, asserts the value of human action in time—which is to say, of history, of drama.\footnote{15}

\section*{Notes}


3. Material dealing with the lectures and textbooks will appear soon in \textit{Studies on Burke and His Time}.

4. For Ferguson's stress on the "state of the question," see, e.g., \textit{Lecture Notes}, Vol. II (Edinburgh University Library, MS). Lecture 65, February 19 (n.d.), 149 f. Thomas Reid suggests that the whole of Aristotle's teachings on sophisms can be summarized as various ways in which the question can be begged or misstated. William Hamilton, ed., \textit{The Works of Thomas Reid} (Edinburgh and London, 1849), pp. 701 f.


6. Cumming's work sets a standard for immanent structural analysis to which this paper means to pay homage, without claiming to meet its exacting scholarly requirements.

7. \textit{Lecture Notes}, Vol. II; Lecture 67 (March 7, 1785), 233 f. The quotation is from Horace's \textit{Epistles}, Bk. I, ep. XI. In the original context, the words come at the end of a depreciation of travel and variety. In Book II, Horace elaborates this theme in connection with time as well as place: he is defending Roman poetry of the imperial age against those who praise only the accomplishments of the republic.

9. A Sermon preached in the Erse language to his Majesty's First Highland Regiment of Foot, Commanded by Lord John Murray at their Cantonment at Camberwell on the 18th Day of December, 1745, Being appointed as a Solemn Fast, by the Reverend Adam Ferguson, Chaplain to the said Regiment: and Translated by him Into English, for the Use of a Lady of Quality in Scotland, at whose Desire it is now published. London: Printed for A. Millar, opposite Katharine Street in the Strand, 1746.


13. Lecture Notes, Vol. I, Lecture 44 (January 21, 1780), 482 ff. In the chapter on the "Intellectual Powers" in the Essay, the distinction is stated as one between the "studious" and the "active." The argument being developed in the text attempts to incorporate this distinction within the more complex distinction between actor and spectator. We are talking about the penetration and sagacity which make up the foresight of men of business, as distinct from men of science, but also about the responsibility and choice which distinguish weighty actions from routine ones. Cf. Thomas Reid, Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1969), pp. 4-21.

14. Essay, 65. Ferguson outlines the patterns discerned by Montesquieu's theory of constitutions, and remarks that when we have grasped this, "we have made an acquisition of knowledge, which, though it does not supersede the necessity of experience, may serve to direct our inquiries, and, in the midst of affairs, to give an order and a method for the arrangement of particulars that occur to our observation." Theory, in short, assists classification for the actor, not the reverse, as for the scientist-spectator. The actor requires historical knowledge, not theoretical knowledge.

15. Institutes of Moral Philosophy (Edinburgh, 1769), pp. 61-65; Lecture Notes, Vol. I, 457-501 ff. These materials on "memory," "Imagination," and "abstraction" consistently emphasize the special character of practical knowledge, and the discussion cannot be reconciled with a Newtonian idea of synthesis. All this will be developed at some length in another paper.

16. Lecture Notes, Vol. I, Lecture 15 (1784), 170 ff. Ferguson introduced a reference to Smith's Wealth of Nations in the 1773 edition of the Essay, and praised it as "equal to what has ever appeared on any subject of science whatever." But he adds immediately that all must agree that wealth must not be "the principal object of any state," and that consequently this science cannot be taken directly as a guide to conduct. "In science we consider our objects apart; in practice it was an error not to have them all in our view at once" (287). The lectures on political economy can be found in the first volume, 192-237 ff and in the second, 458-491 ff. The materials are a little scrambled.
19. See above, 22-33.
20. Montesquieu, Spirit of the Laws, 8.21. Cf. article on “la Chine” and “Chinois (philosophie de)” in the Encyclopédie. The latter does note that Chinese “tranquility” is antithetical to scientific progress.
22. Essay, 205, 288. This discussion of the terms “polished” and “civilized” illustrates especially well Ferguson’s effort to change the “state of the question,” as well as the universality he ascribes to authentic action.
25. Montesquieu, 19.27. Thomas L. Pangle makes extensive use of this chapter in his commentary on the Spirit of the Laws, but neglects Montesquieu’s fears that the system undermines the aristocratic ethos and weakens “policy,” and these are the main themes seized upon by Ferguson. Cf. Thomas L. Pangle, Montesquieu’s Philosophy of Liberalism. A Commentary on the Spirit of the Laws (Chicago and London, 1973), especially ch. 5.
32. Bacon writes: “History is properly concerned with individuals, which are circumscribed by place and time. For though natural history may seem to deal with species, yet this is only because of the general resemblance which in most cases natural objects of the same species bear to one another; so that when you know one, you know all” (2.1). Ferguson opens the Essay with the famous assertion: “Mankind are to be taken in groups, as they have always subsisted. The history of the individual is but a detail of the sentiments and thoughts he has entertained in the view of his species: and every experiment relative to this subject should be made with entire societies, not with single men.” (p. 2) In his lecture notes, however, he distinguishes the “history of the species” from the “history of the individual,” and sees only the latter as the foundation for theory. In the context of methodological rigor, the “history of the species” serves above all as prophetic: “The species indeed exhibits the fruits and effects of faculties, dispositions and powers of which every individual is conscious in himself. And if the effect and exterior shall have fixed our attention, we can possibly return from thence with a disposition to examine the causes and external structure of what is interesting in the effect and external appearance.” Lecture Notes, Vol. I, Lecture 8 (November 24, 1783), 102-104ff, cf. an alternate formulation, 105-106ff. For other signs of difficulties about possible relationships between the history of successive human actions and a scientific theory of man, see,
for example, Lecture Notes, Vol. I, Lecture 3 (November 14, 1776), 49-50ff. I plan to re-
view these materials in a subsequent publication.

Bacon: Literarische Form und moralistische Aussage (Heidelberg, 1974).


also Burckhardt’s vigorous polemic against dialectics as an alternate “ordering device,” pp.
145-146. See also Robert Musil, Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften, ch. 62. For an extensive
treatment of the essay form, published with a valuable appendix containing many state-
ments about the essay by essayists and other critics, see Ludwig Rohner, Der deutsche

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