

interpretation

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interpretation

Volume 14 number 1

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Progress and Commerce in Anglo-American Thought: The Social Philosophy of Adam Ferguson

RONALD HAMOWY

University of Alberta

There can be little doubt that the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment on late eighteenth-century American thought was as thorough and as extensive as on British and Continental philosophy. It is true that some historians have recently exaggerated this influence to the point where it has been claimed that American revolutionary doctrine was primarily a product of Scottish political philosophy.¹ Notwithstanding these distortions, however, there is strong evidence that, at least in the areas of ethics, economics, and social theory, the imprint of Scottish thinking was substantial. Not only did the Scottish universities serve as models for institutions of higher learning in the colonies,² but the works of the various writers who together comprised the Scottish Enlightenment were well-known and highly regarded on this side of the Atlantic.³ Among this group were the greatest philosophers then writing in the English language, including Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Smith, Thomas Reid, Adam Ferguson, and Henry Home, Lord Kames.

Adam Ferguson is today perhaps the least known and appreciated of these

1. Perhaps the most extreme instance of this view is that contained in Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), wherein Wills attempts to interpret the philosophy embedded in the Declaration—at least as Jefferson originally intended it—as exclusively the product of Scottish Enlightenment thought, devoid of Lockean influences.

2. The Scottish impact on American higher education is fully examined in Douglas Sloan, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1971). See also A. Bailey Cutts, "The Educational Influences of Aberdeen in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 2d Ser., xv(1935):229–49, and George S. Pryde, *The Scottish Universities and the Colleges of Colonial America* (Glasgow: Jackson, 1957).

3. Herbert W. Schneider has observed of the Scottish Enlightenment that it "was probably the most potent single tradition in the American Enlightenment. From Hutcheson to Ferguson, including Hume and Adam Smith, came a body of philosophical literature that aroused men from their dogmatic slumbers on both sides of the Atlantic" (*A History of American Philosophy* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1946], p. 246). See also the detailed discussion of the favorable reception given eighteenth-century Scottish moral philosophy and epistemology by American intellectuals in Elizabeth Flower and Murray G. Murphey, *A History of Philosophy in America* (2 vols.; New York: Capricorn Books, 1977), I, pp. 203–361. David Lundberg and Henry F. May's survey of early American library holdings and booksellers' lists bears out the conclusion that works by Scottish Enlightenment thinkers were extremely popular in America ("The Enlightened Reader in America," *American Quarterly*, xxviii[1976]:262–93).

The relationship between Scotland and America in the eighteenth century has recently been the subject of a brief study by William R. Brock, *Scotus Americanus: A Survey of the Sources for Links Between Scotland and America in the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982).

thinkers, despite the distinctive contributions he made to eighteenth-century social theory. Although of lesser stature than were his contemporaries Hume and Smith, Ferguson was a man of letters of international repute during his lifetime, whose work was both as familiar to, and as esteemed by, most educated Americans as to Britons.⁴ The recent resurgence of interest in the Scottish Enlightenment, therefore, makes it particularly appropriate that the character and quality of Ferguson's political and social philosophy be examined and assessed, especially as it touched on questions that interested both Britons and Americans at the close of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries.

The youngest child of the parish minister, Adam Ferguson was born on June 20, 1723, at Logierait, Perthshire, on the border of the Scottish Highlands.⁵ He received his early education both at the parish school and at the grammar school in Perth. In 1738, at the age of fifteen, he was sent to the University of St. Andrews, where he gained a reputation for classical scholarship. Ferguson took his M.A. degree in 1742 and, in the same year, entered the Divinity Hall at St. Andrews, but soon thereafter transferred to the University of Edinburgh to pursue his theological studies. Although having only completed two years of divinity school, Ferguson was offered the deputy chaplaincy of the Black Watch regiment in 1745. He joined the regiment in Flanders and accompanied it at the Battle of Fontenoy. Granted a dispensation from further study by the General Assembly, in part because of his knowledge of Gaelic, Ferguson was ordained in July, 1745, and given the rank of principal chaplain. He remained with his regiment, both at home and abroad, until 1754, at which time Ferguson resigned his commission and quit the clerical profession.

With the help of his friend David Hume, Ferguson was appointed to the post

4. With particular reference to Ferguson's reputation in America, see Gladys Bryson, *Man and Society: The Scottish Inquiry of the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945), p. 31, and Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 343.

Scottish moral philosophy was decisively established in America through the mediation of John Witherspoon, who arrived in the colonies from Scotland to take up the position of president of Princeton in 1768. Witherspoon, one of the more outspoken Evangelical ministers in the Church of Scotland, brought with him an intimate knowledge of the work of the leading Scottish writers, which he kept current and attempted to impart to his students. Thus, Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* appears among the works comprising Witherspoon's recommended reading list for his course in political theory (Dennis F. Thompson, "The Education of a Founding Father: The Reading List for John Witherspoon's Course in Political Theory, as Taken by James Madison," *Political Theory*, IV[1976]:528). See also John Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Varnum Lansing Collins, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1912), p. 144.

A student of Witherspoon's, James Madison seems to have been especially receptive to Ferguson's writings. Madison's debt to Scottish Enlightenment thinking is discussed at some length in Roy Branson, "James Madison and the Scottish Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XL(1979):235-50.

5. The standard biographical essay of Ferguson remains John Small, "Biographical Sketch of Adam Ferguson, LL.D., F.R.S.E., Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Edinburgh," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, xxiii, Part III (1864): 599-655. See also the biographical chapter on Ferguson in David Kettler, *The Social and Political Thought of Adam Ferguson* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1965), pp. 42-82.

of keeper of the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh, in 1757, having succeeded Hume to that office. Following the death of the professor of natural philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, Ferguson was named to that chair in 1759; five years later, in 1764, Ferguson transferred to the chair of pneumatics and moral philosophy, which he held until 1785. It was during his tenure as professor of moral philosophy that three of his four most important works were published: the *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, in 1767; the *Institutes of Moral Philosophy*, a synopsis of his lectures on moral philosophy, in 1769; and the *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic*, in 1783.

In 1778, having received permission from the University to temporarily absent himself, Ferguson served on the Conciliation Commission headed by the Earl of Carlisle, charged with negotiating a settlement with the American colonies. Upon arriving at Philadelphia, the Commission appointed Ferguson its secretary and immediately attempted to enter into negotiations with several members of Congress.⁶ These proved a complete failure, nor was the Commission any more successful in prevailing upon Washington to grant Ferguson a passport through the American lines to treat directly with Congress.⁷ Having been defeated at reaching agreement with the colonies short of recognizing their independence and withdrawing all British troops, the Commission returned home in late 1778, at which point Ferguson resumed his chair at the University.

Because of ill health, Ferguson resigned the professorship of moral philosophy in 1785, at the age of sixty-two, to be succeeded in the position by his one-time student, Dugald Stewart. The University arranged that Ferguson continue to draw a salary by awarding him the chair of mathematics as a sinecure; all lectures in the field were, in fact, to be delivered by a junior professor. During his retirement Ferguson completed his major work in moral philosophy, a revision and expansion of his *Institutes*, entitled *Principles of Moral and Political Science*, which appeared in two volumes in 1792. Ferguson died on February 22, 1816, in his ninety-third year, at St. Andrews, Scotland, and was buried in the grounds of the cathedral there.

Of Ferguson's principal writings, the *Essay on the History of Civil Society* is

6. Extensive discussions of the Carlisle Commission appear in Weldon A. Brown, *Empire or Independence: a Study in the Failure of Reconciliation, 1774-1783* (University, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1941); pp. 244-92, and Carl Van Doren, *Secret History of the American Revolution* (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Publishing Co., 1941), pp. 63-116.

7. The Commission's official letter to Congress was accompanied by personal notes from both William Eden (later Lord Auckland) and George Johnstone—two of the Commissioners—to General Washington, warmly commending Ferguson. Eden referred to the favorable reception to which Ferguson was entitled by virtue of his eminence in the literary world (Eden to Washington, June 9, 1778, in Benjamin Franklin Stevens, ed., *Stevens's Facsimiles of Manuscripts in European Archives Relating to America, 1773-1783* [24 vols.; London: Issued only to subscribers and printed by Malby & Sons, 1889-1895], v, p. 401, facsimile 498), while Johnstone's letter was even more generous. "I beg to recommend to your private civilities my friend Dr. Ferguson," he wrote. "He has been engaged from his early life, in inculcating to mankind the virtuous principles you practise" (Johnstone to Washington, June 10, 1778, in Jared Sparks, ed., *Correspondence of the American Revolution . . .* [4 vols.; Boston: Little, Brown, 1853], II, p. 136).

probably the most important; certainly it has generated the greatest interest among social scientists and intellectual historians in the last twenty years. The work went through seven editions during the author's lifetime,⁸ in addition to appearing in French, German, and Italian translations.⁹ So popular did the *Essay* prove that despite the ready availability of British editions of the work in America¹⁰ at least two American editions appeared by 1819.¹¹

The reception accorded Ferguson's essay was almost universally favorable. Not only did his Scottish contemporaries think highly of the work,¹² but it met with great success in London and on the Continent as well. The poet Thomas

8. The first edition was published simultaneously in Edinburgh, London, and Dublin. In addition to the seven authorized editions that appeared between 1767 and 1814, two pirated editions were apparently issued, the first carrying the imprint "Basil, J. J. Toureisen, 1789," and the second, "Basel, Thurneysen, 1791."

The edition used throughout this paper is a reprinting of the first edition, with a collation of the variants in the seventh edition which appeared in 1814, the last during Ferguson's lifetime, edited by Duncan Forbes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966), hereafter cited as *Essay*.

9. Two French editions were published in Paris, in 1783 and 1796, under the title *Essai sur l'histoire de la société civile*, translated by Claude Bergier and Alexandre Meunier. A German translation by C. F. Jünger, entitled *Versuch über die Geschichte der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, appeared in Leipzig in 1768. In 1807 the work was published in an Italian translation done by P. Antonutti in Venice, under the title *Saggio circa la storia di civile società*.

10. Thus, the edition acquired by Jefferson that appears in his manuscript catalogue and that was included in the collection of books sold to the Library of Congress in 1815 is the second, corrected, edition, published in London in 1768 by A. Millar and T. Cadell (E. Millicent Sowerby, comp., *Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson* [5 vols.; Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1952-1959], III, pp. 20-1, item 2348). Data presented by Lundberg and May indicate that between 1777 and 1813 the *Essay* appeared in twenty-two percent of the catalogues and booklists examined ("Enlightened Reader in America," 283).

11. There was a printing of the seventh edition, published in Boston by Hastings, Etheridge and Bliss in 1809, and an eighth edition, published in Philadelphia by A. Finley in 1819. Charles R. Hildeburn's bibliography of Pennsylvania imprints lists an edition of the *Essay* printed in Philadelphia by Robert Bell in 1773 (*A Century of Printing: The Issues of the Press in Pennsylvania, 1685-1784* [2 vols.; New York: Burt Franklin, 1968], II, p. 164, [item 2878 originally published in 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Press of Matlack & Harvey, 1885-1886]). Hildeburn's evidence for the existence of such an edition is based on an advertising circular issued by Bell in that year, announcing that the *Essay*, "by a living Author of much Estimation whose elegant Performance will greatly delight," would be published by subscription in the fall of 1773 (*Ibid.*, p. 160, item 1857). There appear to be no copies of this edition extant. The editors of the Madison papers, however, state that the copy of the *Essay* obtained for James Madison by William Bradford in 1775 is that which Bell is reputed to have published in 1773 (William Bradford to Madison, January 4, 1775, in William T. Hutchinson and William M. E. Rachel, eds., *The Papers of James Madison*, I [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962], p. 133 n.).

12. Both Hugh Blair and Principal William Robertson thought highly of the work (letter from David Hume to Blair, February 11, 1766, in *The Letters of David Hume*, J. Y. T. Grieg, ed. [2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932], II, pp. 11-12). And Lord Kames wrote of the *Essay* that "the subject, not less beautiful than interesting, employs some vigour in writing, and much original thought" (letter from Lord Kames to Mrs. Edward Montagu, March 6, 1767, in Alexander Fraser Tytler, Lord Woodhouselee, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Honourable Henry Home of Kames* [2 vols.; Edinburgh: William Creech, 1807], II, 48).

Gray found “uncommon strains of eloquence in it”¹³ and Baron d’Holbach regarded it as “answering completely to the high opinion I had conceived of your great abilities and ingenuity.”¹⁴ So well received was the *Essay* that only two weeks after its appearance in London, David Hume was able to write Ferguson: “It is with sincere Pleasure I inform you of the general Success of your Book. I had almost said universal Success; and the Expression would have been proper, as far as a Book can be suppos’d to be diffus’d in a Fortnight, amidst this Hurry of Politics and Faction, I may safely say, that I have met with no body, that has read it, who does not praise it, and these are the People, who by their Reputation and Rank commonly give the Tone on these Occasions.”¹⁵

Indeed, the only person who appears to have had reservations about the *Essay* was Hume himself. A large part of the work had been completed by Ferguson some years earlier, and, in manuscript form, had circulated among Ferguson’s close friends under the title “A Treatise on Refinement.” In 1759 Hume had examined it in this form and it had then met with his approval.¹⁶ However, when the finished manuscript of the *Essay* was offered to Hume for his critical evaluation in 1766, Hume had different thoughts. In February, 1766, he wrote to Hugh Blair:

I have perus’d Ferguson’s Papers [the ms. of the *Essay*] more than once, which had been put into my hands, some time ago, at his desire. I sat down to read them with great Prepossession, founded on my good Opinion of him [and] on a Small Specimen I had seen of them some Years ago, But I am sorry to say it, they have no-wise answer’d my Expectation. I do not think them fit to be given to the Public, neither on account of the Style nor the Reasoning; the Form nor the Matter.¹⁷

Hume’s specific objections to the *Essay* have not been recorded, but the most plausible explanation is that offered by David Kettler, that where it was especially important that Ferguson be clear and precise, Hume found Ferguson’s style both unsystematic and inexact.¹⁸ Indeed, the *Essay* is filled with observations which, once made, are set aside without further discussion despite their be-

13. Letter from Gray to James Beattie, August 12, 1767, in Edmund Gosse, ed., *The Works of Thomas Gray* (4 vols.; New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1885), III, p. 279.

14. Baron d’Holbach to Ferguson, June 15, 1767, in John Small, *Biographical Sketch*, p. 611.

15. Hume to Ferguson, March 10, 1767, in Grieg, ed., *Letters of Hume*, II, p. 125.

16. Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1954), p. 542. See also Hume’s letter to Adam Smith, April 12, 1759, in Raymond Klibansky and Ernest Campbell Mossner, eds., *New Letters of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 52.

17. Hume to Blair, February 11, 1766, in Grieg, ed., *Letters of Hume*, II, pp. 11–12. Hume still held the same opinion of the *Essay* a year after its publication. Again writing to Blair, he commented: “The success of the Book, Dear Dr, which you mention, gives me great Satisfaction, on account of my sincere Friendship for the Author; and so much the rather, as this success was to me unexpected. I have since begun to hope, and even to believe, that I was mistaken; and in this Perswasion [sic] have several times taken it up and read Chapters of it: But to my great Mortification and Sorrow, I have not been able to change my Sentiments” (Hume to Blair, April 1, 1767, *ibid.*, II, p. 133).

18. Kettler, *Thought of Adam Ferguson*, pp. 58–60.

ing pregnant with sociological and political implications. Hume's own disappointment clearly extended to these aspects of the *Essay*, its "reasoning, form, and matter," all of which were found wanting.¹⁹ But despite these limitations, the *Essay* proved a remarkable success and gained for Ferguson an international reputation as a man of letters.²⁰

Although the *Essay* is a study in the social history of man, Ferguson regarded the work as primarily an extension of his researches into moral philosophy. The starting point for any analysis of ethics, Ferguson believed, was the study of the way man functions, both as an individual and in conjunction with other people. If, furthermore, aprioristic notions of man's nature were to be rejected as unsatisfactory, then the only adequate method of gaining information about the rules of morality was by studying man within the context of his history.²¹ It is because of the adoption of this empirical approach to the study of man's nature that Ferguson has been credited with being one of the founders of sociology.²²

Ferguson's adherence to scientific description, to man as he is actually observed, led him to reject the notion of "man in the state of nature," in the sense of man before the advent of society. "Mankind are taken in groupes," he wrote, "as they have always subsisted."²³ That society is coeval with man is confirmed by

19. There is no evidence whatever to support the assertion recently made by Paul A. Rahe that Hume's reaction to the *Essay* stemmed primarily from his differences over Ferguson's claim that primitive societies displayed a vigor absent in more polished nations. Nor did Ferguson hold that "the emergence of commercial society would inevitably be accompanied by a decline in martial fervor that was the ultimate guarantor of political freedom" (Paul A. Rahe, "The Primacy of Politics in Classical Greece," *American Historical Review*, LXXXIX[1984]:280). Rahe is here confusing "martial fervor" with public-spiritedness and an active involvement in public affairs, characteristics Ferguson feared might diminish as societies became more commercial. In any case, Ferguson certainly did not regard the weakening of these social bonds as ineluctable. Indeed, the quotation from Ferguson that Rahe offers in support of his contention has no bearing on the value of martial fervor nor does it suggest that decline is inevitable. The quotation consists of two sentences joined by ellipses; in reality the two statements are taken out of context and are separated by no less than thirty-five pages of text in the Forbes edition of the *Essay*, with the second statement appearing first!

Rahe does no better with the quotation from the *Essay* that prefaces his article (*ibid.*, 265). Once again he has separated two sentences with ellipses. The first statement in fact appears as part of Ferguson's analysis of the dangers that might follow upon the increasing division of labor and is from part five of the *Essay*. The second sentence forms part of Ferguson's discussion of the naturalness of society and appears over 180 pages earlier, in part one. Such distorted quotations can only do a disservice to Ferguson's thought and, ultimately, to the cause of scholarship.

20. Among the many marks of favor the publication of the *Essay* conferred upon its author was the award of an honorary LL.D. by the University of Edinburgh.

21. "Before we can ascertain the rules of morality for mankind, the history of man's nature, his dispositions, his specific enjoyments and sufferings, his condition and future prospects, should be known" (Adam Ferguson, *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* [2d ed.; Edinburgh: A. Kincaid and W. Creech, 1772], p. 2, hereafter cited as *Institutes*).

22. See, for example, Harry E. Barnes, "Sociology before Comte," *American Journal of Sociology*, xxiii(1917):234; Theodor Buddeberg, "Ferguson als Soziologe," *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik*, cxxiii(1925):609-12; and Werner Sombart, "Die Angänge der Soziologie," in Melchoir Palyi, ed., *Hauptprobleme der Soziologie: Erinnerungsgabe für Max Weber* (2 vols.; Munich and Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1923). I, p. 9.

23. *Essay*, p. 4.

the fact that the individual is the bearer of social dispositions and that regardless of where we find man, we find him gathered together with others.²⁴

Quoting Montesquieu's dictum that man is born in society and that there he remains,²⁵ Ferguson insisted that it was more than mere convenience that binds men together. Society is the product of an array of natural, one might almost say instinctive, drives impelling the individual toward social interaction. "We may reckon," he observed,

the parental affection, which, instead of deserting the adult, as among the brutes, embraces more close, as it becomes mixed with esteem, and the memory of its early effects; together with a propensity common to man and other animals, to mix with the herd, and, without reflection, to follow the croud of his species. What this propensity was in the first moment of its operation we know not; but with men accustomed to company, its enjoyments and disappointments are reckoned among the principal pleasures or pains of human life. Sadness and melancholy are connected with solitude; gladness and pleasure with the concourse of men.²⁶

Ferguson rejected the social contract theory as a valid account of the origins of government with the same force and with arguments not dissimilar to those earlier offered by Hume.²⁷ The establishment of formal rules enforceable by a permanent political institution emerged, not from the desire to create a stronger social union, but rather in response to the abuses that had arisen from an imperfect distribution of justice. Ferguson held that a system of formal political arrangements did not rest on consent but was gradually shaped to meet the interests of justice with respect to securing private property.²⁸ It is a useless analytical tool, he claimed, to posit the idea of universal consent to what was, in fact, the gradual emergence of formalized rules of action which took their origin in earlier modes of behavior. "What was in one generation of propensity to herd with the species," Ferguson observed, "becomes, in the ages which follow, a principle of

24. "If both the earliest and the latest accounts collected from every quarter of the earth, represent mankind as assembled in troops and companies; and the individual always joined by affection to one party, while he is possibly opposed to another; employed in the exercise of recollection and foresight; inclined to communicate his own sentiments, and to be made acquainted with those of others; these facts must be admitted as the foundation of all our reasoning relative to man" (*Essay*, p. 3).

25. The statement appears in letter XCIV of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*.

26. *Essay*, pp. 16–17.

27. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L. A. Selby-Bigge, ed. (2d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 534–9. Useful analyses of Hume's views appear in Jonathan Harrison, *Hume's Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 172–89, and Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 84–90.

28. *Essay*, 122–6. The notion that government itself, far from being the product of conscious design, took its form gradually and without deliberate intent has led one commentator to refer to Ferguson's rejection of the social contract as the boldest attack on the contractarian theory of political obligation that had been made up to that time (Herman Huth, "Soziale und Individualistische Auffassung im 18. Jahrhundert, vornehmlich bei Adam Smith und Adam Ferguson," *Staats- und Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschungen* [Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1907], p. 46).

national union. What was originally an alliance for common defence, becomes a concerted plan of political force.”²⁹

The reader must turn to a consideration of Ferguson’s ethics for a clear notion of what the term “state of nature” in fact refers to within the structure of Ferguson’s own thought. Ferguson regarded a progression towards excellence or perfection as the governing principle of all moral life. The natural development of the individual and the species towards perfection *is*, for Ferguson, the “state of nature.” Any point that lies along this continuum of development is as much man’s “state of nature” as is any other point.³⁰ In his major work on moral philosophy, Ferguson noted:

The state of nature or the distinctive character of any progressive being is to be taken, not from its description at the outset, or at any subsequent stage of its progress; but from an accumulative view of its movement throughout. The oak is distinguishable from the pine, not merely by its seed leaf; but by every successive aspect of its form; by its foliage in every successive season; by its acorn; by its spreading top; by its lofty growth; and the length of its period. And the state of nature, relative to every tree in the wood, includes all the varieties of form or dimension through which it is known to pass in the course of its nature.³¹

A sense of this unending improvement of the individual and the species is apparent from any study of the history of mankind. Thus, at one and the same time, Ferguson’s law of perfection offers an explanation both for individual morality and for social progress. All acts generated by a desire for the preservation of what man most values and that are consonant with man’s fellow-feeling, his sense of benevolence, work towards these ends.³²

Ferguson’s conclusions respecting the character of society and the nature of progress were totally antithetical to those of Hobbes, who understood progress solely in terms of man acting against his basic nature. The ends of society, for Hobbes, were easily determined by reference to the purposes which originally impelled man to enter into the social contract. The ends of society for Ferguson, on the other hand, followed directly from man’s progressive nature. “In the human kind,” he wrote, “the species has a progress as well as the individual; they build in every subsequent age on foundations formerly laid; and, in a succession

29. *Essay*, p. 121.

30. “If the palace be unnatural,” wrote Ferguson in an often-quoted passage, “the cottage is no less; and the highest refinements of political and moral apprehension, are not more artificial in their kind, than the first operation of sentiment and reason” (*Essay*, p. 8).

31. Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: A. Strahan & T. Cadell, 1792), I, p. 192, hereafter cited as *Principles*.

32. “Man is by nature a member of society; . . . his perfection consists in the excellency or measure of his natural ability and dispositions or, in other words, it consists in his being an excellent part of the system to which he belongs. So that the effect of mankind should be the same, whether the individual means to preserve himself, or to preserve his community, with either intention he must cherish the love of mankind, as the most valuable part of his character” (*Institutes*, pp. 108–9).

of years, tend to a perfection in the application of their faculties, to which the aid of long experience is required, and to which many generations must have combined their endeavours.”³³

It is true that, unlike many of his French contemporaries,³⁴ Ferguson did not regard individual and social progress as inevitable,³⁵ although he held it as the natural end towards which all men strive. “Progression is the gift of God to all his intelligent creatures,” he remarked, “and is within the competence of the lowest of mankind. . . It is the nature of created mind in the course of experience and observation to improve its sagacity, and to make continual approach to the highest measure of intellectual ability of which it is susceptible.”³⁶

In his introductory comments to the 1966 edition of the *Essay*, Duncan Forbes has denied that the *Essay* can properly be said to belong to the history of the idea of progress, inasmuch as Ferguson devoted a lengthy section of the work to the dangers of luxury and to the irrecoverable loss of much primitive vigor brought about by civilization.³⁷ However, Ferguson’s rejection of the idea of progress in its extreme form did not entail his having repudiated the notion of man’s natural progress, however formulated. Forbes is no doubt justified in wishing to distinguish Ferguson (and the other Scottish Enlightenment writers) from those thinkers who embraced an uncritical faith in universal and inevitable progress directed by conscious design. But, though Ferguson would have rejected such a blindly optimistic view of social development, his belief in the progressive nature of man permeates the *Essay* and underpins all his moral philosophy. In the *Principles*, where Ferguson’s moral theory is spelled out in great detail, Ferguson’s optimism is far clearer and his predictions of unlimited progress unambiguous.³⁸ In light of his comments in the *Essay*, particularly as they are informed by the sentiments expressed in his *Principles*, the claim recently made that Ferguson “prophesied an inevitable decline” once societies had passed from barbarism to

33. *Essay*, p. 5.

34. Condorcet, in particular, comes to mind. Although portions of it are now somewhat dated, J. B. Bury’s study of the idea of progress remains the best general work on the subject (J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* [London: Macmillan, 1920]).

35. Ferguson devoted an extensive portion of the *Essay* to the possibilities of retrogression (pp. 236–80). Consider also the following observation: “The public safety, and the relative interests of states; political establishments, the pretensions of party, commerce, and arts, are subjects which engage the attention of nations. The advantages gained in some of these particulars, determine the degree of national prosperity. The ardour and vigour with which they are at any one time pursued, is the measure of a national spirit. When those objects cease to animate, nations may be said to languish; when they are during any considerable time neglected, states must decline, and their people degenerate” (*ibid.*, p. 211).

36. *Principles*, II, pp. 403–4.

37. Duncan Forbes, “Introduction,” *Essay*, p. xiv.

38. Lois Whitney has called attention to this fact some fifty years ago (Lois Whitney, *Primitivism and the Idea of Progress in English Popular Literature of the Eighteenth Century* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1934], p. 153).

commercialism³⁹ cannot stand up to examination.⁴⁰ Although it is clearly extravagant to assert that he posited “an inevitable, suprahuman logic of continual spiritual as well as material progress,” as does one commentator,⁴¹ it is equally questionable to claim that Ferguson held to a cyclical view of history,⁴² or to deny, as does Forbes, that he should be considered a proponent of the idea of progress at all. Only a proponent of man’s natural progressive development could have concluded that the progress of mankind “in its continual approach to the infinite perfection of what is eternal may be compared to that curve, described by geometers, as in continual approach to a straight line, which it never can reach.”⁴³

All societies, Ferguson claimed, progressed from “rude” to “polished” nations, most evolving through three clearly distinct stages,⁴⁴ the first two of

39. Istvan Hont, “The ‘Rich Country–Poor Country’ Debate in Scottish Classical Political Economy,” in Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, eds., *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 296. Nor, one might add, is there reason to accept Hont’s conclusion that Hume’s disappointment with the *Essay* was occasioned by Ferguson’s play on “the Machiavellian chords” of “growth and decay, virtue and corruption” (*ibid.*, p. 295).

40. Indeed, Ferguson identified a higher degree of morality with the process by which the material progress that marks commercial societies emerges than with the more primitive cultures from which they progressed:

“The end of commercial art is, such a supply of accommodation and pleasure, as wealth may procure: But, suppose this end to be obtained at once, and without any effort; suppose the savage to become suddenly rich, to be lodged in a palace, and furnished with all the accommodations or means of enjoyment, which an ample estate or revenue can bestow; he would either have no permanent relish for such possessions, or, not knowing how to use and enjoy them, would exhibit effects of gross or ungovernable passion, and a brutality of nature, from which, amidst the wants and hardships of his own situation, he is in a great measure restrained.

“Such we may pronounce to be the effect of mere wealth, unattended with education, or apart from the virtues of industry, sobriety, and frugality, which nature has prescribed as the means of attainment: But, in the use of these means, the industrious are furnished with exercises improving to the genius of man; have occasion to experience, and to return the offices of beneficence and friendship; are led to the study of justice, sobriety, and good order, in the conduct of life. And, thus, in the very progress with which they arrive at the possession of wealth, form to themselves a taste of enjoyment, and decency of manners, equivalent to a conviction that happiness does not consist in the measure of fortune, but in its proper use; a condition, indeed, upon which happiness depends, no less in the highest, than in the lowest, or any intermediate state into which nations are led in the pursuit of these, or any other arts” (*Principles*, 1, pp. 254–5).

41. Kettler, *Thought of Adam Ferguson*, pp. 219–20.

42. W. C. Lehmann, *Adam Ferguson and the Beginnings of Modern Sociology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930), p. 149.

43. *Principles*, 1, pp. 184–5.

44. Ferguson’s analysis of the stages of social development and their relation to changes in the notion of private property were adumbrated in slightly altered form by his fellow Scotsmen Sir John Dalrymple (*Essay Towards a General History of Feudal Property in Great Britain* [London: A. Millar, 1757]), Lord Kames (*Historical Law–Tracts* [2 vols.; Edinburgh: Printed for A. Millar, London; and A. Kincaid & J. Bell, Edinburgh, 1758] and the second edition of his *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* [2d ed.; Edinburgh: Printed for R. Fleming & A. Donaldson, 1758]) and, in particular, by Adam Smith, in his 1762–1763 lectures on jurisprudence (*Lectures on*

which are pre-political. Of the varieties of pre-commercial society, the most primitive are those based on hunting and fishing, and in these the notion of private property, except in its most rudimentary sense, is absent.⁴⁵ Lacking a concept of property, these communities possess no formal system of subordination and, consequently, no government.⁴⁶ Such societies Ferguson denominated sav-

Jurisprudence, R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael, and P. G. Stein, eds. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978], pp. 1-394). Dalrymple, Kames, and Smith had postulated the theory that societies progressed through four stages, defined by their primary mode of subsistence—hunting, pastoral, agricultural, and commercial—and that each of these stages reflected differing notions of property and distinct legal and political institutions. The origin and development of this theory has been examined by Ronald L. Meek, “The Scottish Contribution to Marxist Sociology,” in Ronald L. Meek, ed., *Economics and Ideology and Other Essays: Studies in the Development of Economic Thought* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1967), pp. 34–50. (This essay originally appeared in slightly altered form under the same title in John Saville, ed., *Democracy and the Labour Movement: Essays in Honour of Dona Torr* [London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1954], pp. 84–102). Meek has since extended his researches to include a study of French, as well as Scottish, eighteenth-century advocates of the four-stages theory. See his “Smith, Turgot, and the ‘Four-Stages’ Theory,” *History of Political Economy*, III(1971):9–27, and his book-length analysis, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). For a critical examination of the centrality of the four-stages theory to Adam Smith’s thought, see Andrew Skinner, “A Scottish Contribution to Marxist Sociology?” in Ian Bradley and Michael Howard, eds., *Classical and Marxian Political Economy: Essays in Honor of Ronald L. Meek* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), pp. 79–114.

45. The description of primitive communities as exhibiting a form of tribal communism was taken up by a number of nineteenth century social theorists, most notably by Friedrich Engels. Engels, who was familiar with Ferguson’s writings, in commenting on the communal control over property that was reputed to exist among the early Germans, observed: “It has been established that among almost all peoples the cultivated land was tilled collectively by the gens, and later by communistic household communities such as were still found by Caesar among the Suevi” (*The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* [Zurich, 1884; first English edition, London, 1902] [London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1940], pp. 157–8). Engels, at other points in the study, discusses the same system of ownership as prevailing among the early Greeks (68–9), the Iroquois (99), and the Celts (149).

Tribal ownership of the land in primitive societies appears to have been so well accepted an hypothesis that even the great nineteenth-century legal scholar Henry Maine felt easy in noting: “The collective ownership of the soil by groups of men either in fact united by blood-relationship, or believing or assuming that they are so united, is now entitled to take rank as an ascertained primitive phenomenon, once universally characterising those communities of mankind between whose civilisation and our own there is any distinct connection or analogy” (Henry Sumner Maine, *Lectures on the Early History of Institutions* [New York: Henry Holt, 1875], pp. 1–2). See also chapter x, “Classifications of Property,” in Maine’s *Dissertations on Early Law and Custom* (New York: Henry Holt, 1886), pp. 335–61.

46. “Where no profit attends dominion, one party is as much averse to the trouble of perpetual command, as the other is to the mortification of perpetual submission” (*Essay*, p. 84).

That the institution of a formal political structure rests upon the prior establishment of a system of private property is a concept common to the Scottish historical school. Adam Smith’s analysis is especially close to that offered by Ferguson. “Among hunters,” Smith commented in his 1766 lectures on jurisprudence, “there is no regular government. . . . The appropriation of herds and flocks, which introduced an inequality of fortune, was that which first gave rise to regular government. Till there be property there can be no government, the very end of which is to secure wealth” (Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, p. 404). Similar sentiments appear in the *Wealth of Nations* (Adam Smith,

age. Even when savage societies base their mode of subsistence on some form of agriculture, their notion of property remains communal.⁴⁷

Most agrarian and pastoral societies, however, are likely to be those in which property has ceased to remain communal and in which private wealth takes the form of agricultural products or of a herd of animals. Although private property will not have yet become institutionalized into a formal system of laws in these communities, it is a principal object of individual and social concern.⁴⁸ Societies thus marked by the emergence of personal property Ferguson called *barbarian*.

The causes for this transition from savagery to barbarism are unclear.⁴⁹ The motive for the emergence of private property appears to center upon the parent's desire for "better provision for his children than is found under the promiscuous management of many copartners."⁵⁰ At that point, when the labor and skill of some members of the community are applied apart, when they aim at *exclusive possession* and "the individual no longer finds among his associates the same inclination to commit every subject to public use, he [too] is seized with concern for his personal fortune; and is alarmed by the cares which every person entertains for himself." Such feelings, Ferguson added, begin to pervade all members of society as much from the desire to emulate and from jealousy as from economic necessity.⁵¹

With the advent of property, the members of the community can now be distinguished one from the other by unequal possessions, which in turn lays the foundation for a permanent subordination of rank. Just as savage societies appear to bear the crude outlines of democracies, so, Ferguson claimed, barbarous nations resemble monarchies.⁵² However, the disparities of rank that mark barbarous states are not yet sufficiently formalized for a concerted plan of government

An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, eds. [2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976], II, pp. 709–10 [v.i.b.2]).

For a valuable discussion of the relationship between property and government among the members of the Scottish historical school, see Roy Pascal's seminal article, "Property and Society: The Scottish Historical School of the Eighteenth Century," *Modern Quarterly* (London), I(1938): 167–79.

47. "After they have shared the toils of the seed-time, they enjoy the fruits of the harvest in common. The field in which they have planted . . . is claimed as a property by the nation, but is not parcelled in lots to its members. They go forth in parties to prepare the ground, to plant, and to reap. The harvest is gathered into the public granary, and from thence, at stated times, is divided into shares for the maintenance of separate families" (*Essay*, p. 82).

48. *Essay*, p. 82.

49. Indeed, in its naïveté and simplicity, the reader is reminded of Rousseau's analysis of the origin of private property that appears in his *Discourse on Inequality* (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Sur l'origine de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, in *Œuvres complètes*, Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, eds. [Bibliothèque de la Pléiade; Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1964], III, pp. 164, 171.

50. *Essay*, p. 96.

51. *Essay*, pp. 96–7.

52. *Essay*, p. 100.

to have emerged.⁵³ The distinction between leader and follower continues blurred; their pursuits and occupations remain the same, their minds are equally cultivated. There is no civil control, only brute force; no formal set of rules, only habit and power. Yet, Ferguson noted, “property is secure, because each has a friend, as well as an enemy; and if the one is disposed to molest, the other is ready to protect.”⁵⁴

The chief threat to property in barbarous communities issues from outside the tribe, and war, whether offensive or defensive, is its main concern. While this state of affairs prevails, internal usurpation of power is impossible and no formal arrangement of laws nor any systematic and ongoing institutions to enforce them are found necessary.⁵⁵ However, once society has secured itself from its foreign enemies, “the individual at home bethinks him of what he may gain or lose for himself: the leader is disposed to enlarge the advantages which belong to his station; the follower becomes jealous of rights which are open to inroad; and parties who united before, from affection and habit, or from regard to their common preservation, disagree in supporting their several claims to precedence or profit.”⁵⁶

This clash of faction, which emerges out of a desire “to withstand the encroachments of sovereignty” upon the rights and property of the subject,⁵⁷ gives rise to government restrained by law.⁵⁸ Government, for Ferguson, was in its origin a natural outgrowth of the conflict of party in domestic struggle. And from this struggle, he contended, issued the earliest political institutions, which were based on previously observed but not explicitly formulated rules.

Two themes emerge in Ferguson’s discussion of the rise of government that are reiterated throughout his work and that are central to his social philosophy. The first concerns the ongoing value of social conflict and competition, while the

53. *Essay*, p. 103.

54. *Essay*, p. 106.

55. *Essay*, p. 125. But compare the description of the origin of political establishments that Ferguson at one point offered in his *Principles*. “Man,” he wrote, “is born naked, defenceless, and exposed to greater hardships than any other species of animal; His society, also, prior to any manner of political establishment, we may imagine exposed to extreme disorder; and there, also, we may fancy the spur of necessity no less applied than in the urgency of his mere animal wants. From these motives, accordingly, we admit the arts of human life, whether commercial or political, to have originated, and suppose that the consideration of necessity must have operated prior to that of convenience . . .” (I, p. 239).

56. *Essay*, p. 125.

57. The terminology that Ferguson here used is confusing. “Sovereignty” and “subject” are to be understood only in some metaphorical sense, since Ferguson’s discussion at this point has exclusive reference to barbarous societies prior to the establishment of government.

58. I can find little evidence to support Kettler’s contention that “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” (David Kettler, “History and Theory in Ferguson’s *Essay on the History of Civil Society: A Reconsideration*,” *Political Theory*, v[1977]:453). Indeed, with respect to the ultimate purposes of government, Ferguson, Hume, and Smith appear to differ in only minor particulars.

second has reference to the role of instinct and habit in shaping social institutions. Conflict, Ferguson contended, is a natural phenomenon; our very games and sports testify to our love of contention. This fundamental desire to compete, when manifested in the animosities of faction, assures a vigorous and flourishing society. Without the vigilance and spirit that accompany the divisions of party, free government becomes impossible and despotism quickly follows. Indeed, Ferguson went even further and claimed that war itself gives rise to many of the more noble sentiments of which mankind is capable.⁵⁹ In addition, war advances that shared feeling of community which cements social life. "The sense of a common danger, and the assaults of an enemy," he wrote, "have been frequently useful to nations, by uniting their members more firmly together, and by preventing the secessions and actual separations in which their civil discord might otherwise terminate."⁶⁰

Conflict and rivalry are thus natural to men at all stages of social development and contribute substantially to a host of beneficial social ends.⁶¹ Not only does war act to encourage social cohesion, but the struggle of faction contributes both to the original emergence of government constrained by law and to the public spiritedness and vigilance which forestalls the rise of despotism. Advanced societies, Ferguson maintained, were particularly prone to degenerate into despotism as each individual concentrated his activities on the private pursuit of fortune. A society secure from foreign attack and internal strife and comprised of citizens preoccupied with their private interests is easily corrupted⁶² and may fall into a condition of political slavery. "Liberty," Ferguson contended, "is maintained by the continued differences and oppositions of numbers, not by their concurring zeal in behalf of equitable government."⁶³ Duncan Forbes has quite justifiably

59. "Without the rivalship of nations, and the practice of war, civil society itself could scarcely have found an object, or a form. Mankind might have traded without any formal convention, but they cannot be safe without a national concert. The necessity of a public defence, has given rise to many departments of state, and the intellectual talents of men have found their busiest scene in wielding their national forces. To overawe, or intimidate, or, when we cannot persuade with reason, or resist with fortitude, are the occupations which give its most animating exercise, and its greatest triumphs, to a vigorous mind; and he who has never struggled with his fellow-creatures, is a stranger to half the sentiments of mankind" (*Essay*, p. 24).

Adam Smith, in like vein, refers to the "ennobling hardships and hazards of war" (*Theory of Moral Sentiments*, D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, eds. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979], p. 134 [III.2.35]).

60. *Essay*, p. 22.

61. Several commentators have taken note of this apparent contradiction in Ferguson's thought: that he could view man's hostile and contentious instincts as of enormous social utility while at the same time advocating a system of ethics predicated on fellow-feelings of sympathy and benevolence. See, for example, Paul Janet, *Histoire de la science politique dans ses rapports avec la morale* (2 vols.; 3rd ed.; Paris: Ancienne Librairie Germer Baillière, 1887), II, pp. 565–6, and Duncan Forbes, "Introduction," *Essay*, pp. xviii–xix.

62. "The national vigour," Ferguson wrote, "declines from the abuse of that very security which is procured by the supposed perfection of public order" (*Essay*, p. 223).

63. *Essay*, p. 128.

noted that Ferguson's discussion of the dangers of political tranquility and the value of social faction are a critical running commentary on Hume's political philosophy.⁶⁴ Indeed, nowhere did Ferguson more clearly distance himself from Hume's politics than in his treatment of the relation between party faction and good government.⁶⁵ On this issue, Ferguson's views were at substantial variance from those of his fellow Scots while they tended to approach those of Edmund Burke, who wrote similarly that the existence of party divisions is inseparable from free government.⁶⁶

What is somewhat more difficult to justify is Ferguson's conclusion that the ferocity of armed conflict plays a crucial role in the evolution and survival of civilized societies.⁶⁷ His emphasis on the value of dissension can probably be made more palatable if we include among the forces against which the will should be exerted, as I'm sure he meant to, the hostility of nature itself. There is, after all, great drama in the way in which the American West was tamed and settled by sheer strength of character, and its early settlers perhaps best reflect the active independent citizen whom Ferguson would have regarded with approval. There is, however, no denying that Ferguson saw in the rivalry of nations a device for cementing the social bonds and for providing an outlet for selfless action. In the process of pacifying man's animosities, Ferguson wrote,

64. "Introduction," *Essay*, p. xxxvi.

65. Consider the following sentiments from Hume's essay on political parties: "As much as legislators and founders of states ought to be honoured and respected among men, as much ought the founders of sects and factions to be detested and hated; because the influence of faction is directly contrary to that of laws. Factions subvert government, render laws impotent, and beget the fiercest animosities among men of the same nation, who ought to give mutual assistance and protection to each other. And what should render the founders of parties more odious is, the difficulty of extirpating these weeds, when once they have taken root in any state. They naturally propagate themselves for many centuries, and seldom end but by the total dissolution of that government, in which they are sown" (David Hume, "Of Parties in General," *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, eds. [2 vols.; new ed.; London: Longmans, Green, 1882], 1, pp. 127–8 [reprint ed.: Vol. III, *The Philosophical Works* (Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1964)]).

Smith too had grave reservations respecting the benefits of faction. See Donald Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics: An Essay in Historiographic Revision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 158–60, and Smith's references to the dangers inherent in the clash of political and religious party that appear in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 155 (III.3.43), p. 170 (III.5.13), p. 232 (VI.ii.2.15), pp. 241–2 (VI.iii.12).

66. Edmund Burke, "Observations on 'The Present State of the Nation'" (1769), in *Works* (12 vols.; rev. ed.; Boston: Little, Brown, 1865–1867), 1, p. 271.

Herta H. Jogland, in commenting on Ferguson's discussion of the benefits arising out of political faction, implies an analogue between Ferguson's view of the role of healthy competition in political life, on the one hand, and commercial life, on the other (*Ursprünge und Grundlagen der Soziologie bei Adam Ferguson* [Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1959], p. 101).

67. Duncan Forbes has written of this aspect of Ferguson's thought: "None of the leading thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment believed in perpetual peace, either as a practical possibility or as an ideal . . . ; and they were well aware of the creative as well as destructive role of war in the development of civilization. But Ferguson's is the most profound and disturbing of these glosses on the high hopes of the Enlightenment" ("Introduction," *Essay*, p. xviii).

we may hope, in some instances, to disarm the angry passions of jealousy and envy; we may hope to instil into the breasts of private man sentiments of candour toward their fellow-creatures, and a disposition to humanity and justice. But it is vain to expect that we can give to the multitude of a people a sense of union among themselves, without admitting hostility to those who oppose them. Could we at once, in the case of any nation, extinguish the emulation which is excited from abroad, we should probably break or weaken the bands of society at home, and close the busiest scenes of national occupations and virtues.⁶⁸

The positive but unintended effects that Ferguson claimed characterizes social conflict are illustrative of a more general social principle that emerges throughout his writings, namely, that social institutions take their form not from deliberate calculation but from instinct and habit. “The artifices of the beaver, the ant, and the bee,” he observed,

are ascribed to the wisdom of nature. Those of polished nations are ascribed to themselves, and are supposed to indicate a capacity superior to that of rude minds. But the establishments of men, like those of every animal, are suggested by nature, and are the result of instinct, directed by the variety of situations in which mankind are placed. Those establishments arose from successive improvements that were made, without any sense of their general effect; and they bring human affairs to a state of complication, which the greatest reach of capacity with which human nature was ever adorned, could not have projected; nor even when the whole is carried into execution, can it be comprehended in its full extent.⁶⁹

The conception here offered that social structures are formed spontaneously is possibly the single most spectacular contribution to social philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment. Such a theory is able to provide an explanation for complex social phenomena without recourse to descriptions requiring the presence of a designer or coordinator. Regularities and orderly arrangements in the social sphere need not be the deliberate product of human design. Rather, the theory provides that the complex organization inherent in our social institutions can be, and indeed most often is, the result of countless individual actions, none of which is intentionally aimed at contributing to any preconceived plan. Society is not formed from any rational calculation, but spontaneously; its institutions are the outcome of men’s actions that have as their objects more immediate private ends.⁷⁰

68. *Essay*, p. 25.

69. *Essay*, p. 182.

70. It is important to underscore the fact that the theory here expounded does not make the claim that social structures take their shape independent of the action of individuals—but only independent of their intent. There is no attempt to reduce social institutions to products of arcane forces operating according to laws that do not provide for the intervention of any human agency. It follows that the theory of spontaneous order as propounded by Ferguson and the other Scottish writers cannot legitimately be regarded as a precursor to the anti-individualistic theories of social evolution that appeared in the nineteenth century, as has been claimed by some sociologists. See, for example, Buddeberg, “Ferguson als Soziologe,” 625, and Roy Pascal, “Herder and the Scottish Historical School,” *Publications of the English Goethe Society: Papers Read Before the Society, 1938–1939*, New Ser., xiv(1938–1939):28.

The revolutionary nature of this explanation of the essential characteristics of most complex social patterns should not be underestimated. Social institutions are exceedingly intricate and it is, at least at first blush, counter-intuitive to suppose that they take their shape from anything other than conscious intent. Indeed, the argument from design dictates that when objects reach a certain order of intricacy, such as the social arrangements under which men operate, we must suppose them to have had a designer.⁷¹ The theory of spontaneously generated orders explicitly denies this conclusion; far from being the product of human contrivance, the theory provides that these arrangements emerged as the unintended and unanticipated result of human action through the process of adaptive evolution.

This account of the growth of institutions is, of course, not limited to Ferguson but appears in the writings of the other Scottish moral philosophers as well. David Hume, for example, examined the distinction between the motives behind individual actions and the emergence of general rules of justice in terms of this doctrine.⁷² The principle perhaps presents itself most clearly in his account of the rights of property, right, and obligation. There Hume conceded that they served the public good but denied that the public good was the motive for their adoption. "If men had been endow'd with such a strong regard for public good," he wrote,

they wou'd never have restrain'd themselves by these rules; so that the laws of justice arise from natural principles in a manner still more oblique and artificial. 'Tis self-love which is their real origin; and as the self-love of one person is naturally contrary to that of another, these several interested passions are oblig'd to adjust themselves after such a manner as to concur in some system of conduct and behaviour. This system, therefore, comprehending the interest of each individual, is of course advantageous to the public; tho' it be not intended for that purpose by the inventors.⁷³

One of the most explicit presentations of the theory that complex social phenomena, especially economic phenomena, are self-coordinating and do not require conscious ordering, was offered by Adam Smith. Hence the centrality in Smith's thought of such notions as "natural justice" and the "invisible hand" in connection with the self-regulating mechanism of the market. Consider as an example Smith's account of the evolution of the division of labor as the unintended consequence of men's propensity to exchange goods. "The division of labour," Smith wrote, "from which so many advantages are derived, is not originally the effect of any human wisdom, which foresees and intends the general opulence

71. The relation between invisible-hand explanations and the argument from design is touched on in Edna Ullmann-Margalit, "Invisible-Hand Explanations," *Synthese*, xxxix(1978):263–91.

72. Hume, "Of the Origin of Justice and Property," *Treatise of Human Nature*, pp. 484–501. For discussions of the role the theory of spontaneous order plays in Hume's social theory, see F. A. Hayek, "The Legal and Political Philosophy of David Hume," in V. C. Chappell, ed., *Hume* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 335–60, and Knud Haakonssen, *The Science of a Legislator: The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 4–44.

73. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 529.

to which it gives occasion. It is the necessary, though very slow and gradual consequence of a certain propensity in human nature which has in view no such extensive utility; the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another.”⁷⁴

Smith first employed the concept of the invisible hand in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*⁷⁵ in the context of his examination of the effects of the uneven distribution of wealth. With reference to the rich, he observed:

They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity, though they mean only their own conveniency, though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species.⁷⁶

Smith again had recourse to the expression “invisible hand” in the *Wealth of Nations*, published some seventeen years later, when he once again used it to describe the beneficial but unintended social outcome of individual actions, each aiming at some distinct private end.⁷⁷

Nor did Smith limit the scope to which the doctrine of spontaneously generated orders was applicable to economic phenomena. Duncan Forbes has employed the phrase “the law of the heterogeneity of ends” to describe this aspect of Scottish thought and has pointed out the pervasiveness of Smith’s use of this principle in explicating social issues.⁷⁸ Indeed, Forbes provides an extensive list

74. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, I, p. 25 [I.ii.1].

75. This is not, strictly speaking, correct. The term appears in Smith’s “History of Astronomy” [III.2], which was probably penned before his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. See Alec Macfie, “The Invisible Hand of Jupiter,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XXXII(1971):595–9.

76. *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, pp. 184–5 [IV.1.10].

77. “As every individual, therefore, endeavours as much as he can both to employ his capital in the support of domestick industry, and so to direct that industry that its produce may be of the greatest value; every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the publick interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestick to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the publick good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it” (I, p. 456 [IV.ii.9]).

78. Duncan Forbes, “‘Scientific’ Whiggism: Adam Smith and John Millar,” *Cambridge Journal*, VII(1954):643–70.

It should be pointed out that Forbes’s law of the heterogeneity of ends is not quite synonymous with the principle of spontaneously generated orders as used in this essay. Forbes’s law encompasses

of examples where Smith employed the device to explain the unplanned consequences of human action. Instances include the “silent and insensible operation of foreign commerce” on the authority of the feudal barons⁷⁹ and the unintended effects on the political power of the nobility of their consuming the whole of the value of their rents.⁸⁰

Although there are fewer instances of Ferguson’s use of the theory of spontaneous order than appear in Smith’s writings, mainly the result of Ferguson’s lack of interest in purely economic questions, Ferguson’s applications of the doctrine are, for the most part, much clearer and less ambiguous, especially when they have reference to non-economic phenomena. For example, Ferguson explicitly rejected the notion that the institutions we associate with government are the product of conscious design. “No constitution,” he observed,

is formed by concert, no government is copied from a plan. The members of a small state contend for equality; the members of a greater, find themselves classed in a certain manner that lays a foundation for monarchy. They proceed from one form of government to another, by easy transitions, and frequently under old names adopt a new constitution. The seeds of every form are lodged in human nature; they spring up and ripen with the season. The prevalence of a particular species is often derived from an imperceptible ingredient mingled in the soil.⁸¹

Ferguson concluded that we need put no credence in the theory that social arrangements are the creation of some original Lycurgus-like legislator, who deliberately structured the consistency and symmetry that marks our political and legal institutions.⁸²

In contradistinction to Ferguson, one need only point to Rousseau, who, in his discussion of the legislator, noted that he must possess an almost superhuman intelligence that would allow him to stand above the ordinary human passions. He would thus be in a position not only to mold the new and perfect institutions by which men would be governed but to actually change the essential nature of

the whole spectrum of human actions that issue in significant but unintended social consequences. The doctrine of spontaneous order, on the other hand, has specific reference only to those human actions the unintended effects of which, in the aggregate, result in social institutions or complex social patterns. The principle of spontaneous order thus refers to a narrower range of unplanned effects than does Forbes’s law.

79. *Wealth of Nations*, I, pp. 417–18 (III.iv.9–10).

80. *Wealth of Nations*, I, pp. 418–22 (III.iv.10–17). So embedded is this principle in Smith’s thought that it has been seen as extending to his ethical theory as well. Thus, in discussing the role utility plays in shaping the rules of morality, Campbell and Ross refer to “Smith’s repeated attempts to demonstrate the unintended utilitarian consequences of non-utilitarian motivations” (T. D. Campbell and I. S. Ross, “The Utilitarianism of Adam Smith’s Policy Advice.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XLII[1981]:76). And Haakonssen remarks of Smith’s ethics that “the general rules of morality are thus the unintended outcome of a multitude of individual instances of natural moral evaluation” (*Science of a Legislator*, p. 61).

81. *Essay*, p. 123.

82. *Essay*, p. 123.

man.⁸³ It is, therefore, not surprising that Rousseau felt such a profound admiration for Lycurgus.

The belief that it was within the power of the legislator to create social institutions of enormous complexity, which, in addition, would constrain men to live virtuous lives, was not an uncommon view among the more radical French revolutionaries, who all seem to have found their model of the ideal legislator in Lycurgus.⁸⁴ Nor did this belief stop at the Channel. It can, surprisingly, be found even in Burke, who wrote of “the wise legislators of all countries, who aimed at improving instincts into morals, and at grafting the virtues on the stock of the natural affections.”⁸⁵ Ferguson, of course, was an adamant opponent of this view, which he, together with the other Scottish moral philosophers, successfully undermined by applying the theory of spontaneously generated orders to the origin and growth of political institutions.

Nor did Ferguson limit the application of this doctrine to explaining the development of systems of government. In a particularly insightful comment, Ferguson observed that language was an especially good example of an institution that takes its shape from the actions of countless individuals, who neither aim at nor are capable of comprehending the complexity that language displays. Language is one of the clearest examples of an intricately ordered social arrangement that, although the product of individual actions, is not consciously designed. “Parts of speech,” Ferguson wrote,

which, in speculation, cost the grammarian so much study, are in practice familiar to the vulgar: The rudest tribes, even the idiot, and the insane, are possessed of them: They are soonest learned in childhood; insomuch, that we must suppose human nature, in its lowest state, competent to the use of them; and, without the intervention of uncommon genius, mankind, in a succession of ages, qualified to accomplish in detail this amazing fabric of language, which, when raised to its height, appears so much

83. “Celui qui ose entreprendre d’instituer un peuple doit se sentir en état de changer, pour ainsi dire, la nature humaine; de transformer chaque individu, qui par lui-même est un tout parfait et solitaire, en partie d’un plus grand tout dont cet individu reçoit en quelque sorte sa vie et son être; d’alterer la constitution de l’homme pour la renforcer; de substituer une existence partielle et morale à l’existence physique et indépendante que nous avons tous reçue de la nature. Il faut, en un mot, qu’il ôte à l’homme ses forces propres pour lui en donner qui lui soient étrangères et dont il ne puisse faire usage sans le secours d’autrui. Plus ces forces naturelles sont mortes et anéanties, plus les acquises sont grandes et durables, plus aussi l’institution est solide et parfaite: En sorte que si chaque Citoyen n’est rien, ne peut rien, que par tous les autres, et que la force acquise par le tout soit égale ou supérieure à la somme des forces naturelles de tous les individus, on peut dire que la législation est au plus haut point la perfection qu’elle puisse atteindre” (*Du contrat social* [book II, chapter vii], in *Œuvres complètes*, III, pp. 381–2).

84. See Harold T. Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries: A Study in the Development of the Revolutionary Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), *passim*, but esp. pp. 146–70. Duncan Forbes has remarked that the destruction of the Legislator myth, which found such favor among certain eighteenth-century intellectuals, “was perhaps the most original and daring *coup* of the social science of the Scottish Enlightenment” (“Introduction,” *Essay*, p. xxiv).

85. “Letters on a Regicide Peace” (1796–1797), in *Works*, v, p. 311.

above what could be ascribed to any simultaneous effort of the most sublime and comprehensive abilities.⁸⁶

Ferguson's application of the doctrine of spontaneous order as an explanation of the development of institutions is extensive. Most complex social arrangements, he contended, whether political, linguistic, economic, legal, or otherwise, are likely to have taken their form as the unintended consequence of the efforts of large numbers of actors, often acting over long periods of time. In a particularly elegant passage of his *Essay*, Ferguson noted:

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; they arise, long before the date of philosophy, from the instincts, not from the speculations of men. The croud of mankind, are directed in their establishments and measures, by the circumstances in which they are placed; and seldom are turned from their way, to follow the plan of any single projector.

Every step and every movement of the multitude, even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future; and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design.⁸⁷

Ferguson's theory of spontaneous development, when wedded to his notions respecting man's natural progress towards excellence, led him to conclude that social arrangements took their ultimate form in the institutions that mark com-

86. *Principles*, I, p. 43. Dugald Stewart, in his own discussions of the origin and nature of language, twice quoted this passage with approval. See Stewart's *Dissertation: Exhibiting the Progress of Metaphysical, Ethical, and Political Philosophy, Since the Revival of Letters in Europe* (1815–1827), in Sir William Hamilton, ed., *The Collected Works* (11 vols.; Edinburgh: Thomas Constable, 1854), I, p. 365; and, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1792–1827), Vol. III, *ibid.*, IV, p. 27.

87. *Essay*, p. 122. Despite the extensive literature dealing with Scottish Enlightenment social theory, the role played by the notion of spontaneous order in Scottish philosophy has been neglected by all but a handful of commentators. (Exception must be made for Friedrich Meinecke, whose *Die Entstehung des Historismus* [2 vols.; Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1936] discusses this theory at some length.) Outside the field of economics proper, most scholars appear to have become aware of the doctrine and its widespread implications through the writings of F. A. Hayek, whose own work in political and social philosophy is explicitly indebted to the nonintentionalist aspects of Scottish thought. See especially Hayek's "Individualism: True and False" (1945), in F. A. Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), pp. 1–32; *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 54–70; and, "Kinds of Rationalism" (1965) and "The Results of Human Action but not of Human Design" (1967), in F. A. Hayek, *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 82–95, 96–105.

Of the intellectual historians who have recently discussed Ferguson's thought, the few who make reference to the relation between ordered arrangements and unintended outcomes appear to owe the structure of their analysis to Hayek. See, for example, Louis Schneider, ed., *The Scottish Moralists on Human Nature and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. xxix–xlvi; Pasquale Salvucci, *Adam Ferguson: Sociologia e filosofia politica* (Urbino: Argalia, 1972), pp. 533–5; and, Alan Swingewood, "Origins of sociology: the case of the Scottish Enlightenment," *British Journal of Sociology*, XXI(1970):174. Both Schneider and Salvucci are expressly indebted to Hayek's interpretation of this aspect of Scottish social philosophy.

mercial society. The establishment of private property—and, by implication, the formal governmental organization necessary to protect it—was, for Ferguson, so deeply rooted in man’s nature that, despite Ferguson’s references to its evolutionary character, he regarded the impetus towards private possession as universal and its institutionalization as essential to man’s moral growth.⁸⁸

Ferguson was prepared to concede that commercial societies, that is, those based on the principle of private property, would inevitably display an uneven distribution of wealth. But this, he contended, served the essential function of acting as a spur to the industry and an incentive to the labor of the great mass of the population.⁸⁹ The ultimate effect of the economic inequality that characterizes commercial societies is to encourage the production of ever-greater quantities of wealth, thus benefitting all members of the community. “The object of commerce is wealth,” wrote Ferguson, and “in the progress, as well as in the result of commercial arts, mankind are enabled to subsist in growing numbers; learn to ply their resources, and to wield their strength, with superior ease and success.”⁹⁰

Ferguson did not back away from embracing a regime of commerce of the most extended sort, despite what he regarded as its potential dangers. Indeed, he argued in his *Principles* that active participation in commercial life encouraged men in the exercise of a host of virtues, including industry, sobriety, frugality, justice, even beneficence and friendship.⁹¹ Although Ferguson contended that civilization was not invariably accompanied by a high degree of commercial activity,⁹² he did insist that the prime motive force for individual and social progress was ambition, “the specific principle of advancement uniformly directed to this end, and not satiated with any given measure of gratification.” And ambition, in turn, he noted, operated no less “in the concerns of mere animal life; in the provision of subsistence, of accommodation, and ornament,” as “in the progress of society, and in the choice of its institutions.”⁹³ Further, and more important, Ferguson saw no conflict between those social arrangements that acted as guarantees of individual liberty and those that encouraged an increase in wealth.⁹⁴ Indeed, he contended that the forces that lead to an expansion in population, which Ferguson equated with social wealth, required the successful pur-

88. “The dispositions which refer to the preservation of the individual, while they continue to operate in the manner of instinctive desires, are nearly the same in man that they are in the other animals; but in him they are sooner or later combined with reflection and foresight; they give rise to his apprehensions on the subject of property, and make him acquainted with that object of care which he calls his interest” (*Essay*, p. 11).

89. *Principles*, II, p. 371.

90. *Principles*, I, p. 254, p. 253.

91. *Principles*, I, p. 254.

92. *Principles*, I, p. 252. The examples Ferguson offered in this connection were Sparta and the Roman Republic.

93. *Principles*, I, p. 235.

94. “The laws made to secure the rights and liberties of the people, may serve as encouragements to population and commerce” (*Essay*, p. 136).

suit of commerce coupled with a vigorous defense of individual rights. "The growth of industry," he wrote, "the endeavours of men to improve their arts, to extend their commerce, to secure their possessions, and to establish their rights, are indeed the most effectual means to promote population."⁹⁵

These sentiments cast grave doubt on J. G. A. Pocock's conclusions, which see a basic antagonism between commercial society and a polity of free men in Ferguson's philosophy. It is, I think, a distortion of Ferguson's thought to conclude that he shared the view that "commerce and culture were incompatible with virtue and liberty"⁹⁶ or, as Pocock wrote specifically of Ferguson, that "society as an engine for the production and multiplication of goods was inherently hostile to society as the moral foundation of personality."⁹⁷ Ferguson was neither distrustful of wealth nor did he believe that it invariably retarded social virtue and a free society.⁹⁸ The centrality of the notion of progress to Ferguson's thought bears repeating. The ascent of man toward perfection represents the primary motive force of human action, while, with respect to our social arrangements, progress takes the form of a transition from savagery to barbarism and, ultimately, to civilization.⁹⁹ Commercial societies, which Ferguson closely associated—if not completely identified—with civilization were, thus, no less natural, no less indicative of man's never-ending movement toward perfection, than were the more primitive social institutions they supplanted. "If the palace be

95. *Essay*, p. 140.

96. J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 492. Although it is put forward in its most fully developed form in *The Machiavellian Moment*, Pocock's argument earlier appeared in "Civic Humanism and its Role in Anglo-American Thought," and "Machiavelli, Harrington and English Political Ideologies in the Eighteenth Century" in J. G. A. Pocock, ed., *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), pp. 80–103 and pp. 104–47. See also Pocock's "The Machiavellian Moment Revisited: A Study in History and Ideology," *Journal of Modern History*, LIII(1981):49–72, for a summary of the controversy surrounding his thesis. It is of some interest that Pocock has recently referred to the civic humanist interpretation of eighteenth-century Anglo-American political theory as simply a "paradigm," rather than as canonical description ("Cambridge Paradigms and Scotch Philosophers: A Study of the Relations Between the Civic Humanist and the Civil Jurisprudential Interpretation of Eighteenth-Century Social Thought," in Hont and Ignatieff, *Wealth and Virtue*, pp. 235–52).

Pocock's attempt to assimilate the writers of the Scottish Enlightenment into his civic humanist model has been questioned by earlier commentators. See James Moore, "Hume's Political Science and the Classical Republican Tradition," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, x(1977):809–39, and, particularly, Edward J. Harpham, "Liberalism, Civic Humanism, and the Case of Adam Smith," *American Political Science Review*, LXXVIII(1984):764–74.

97. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, p. 501. Duncan Forbes has similarly noted: "It is precisely community that is likely to be a casualty in the progress of civilization" ("Adam Ferguson and the Idea of Community," in Douglas Young, et al., *Edinburgh in the Age of Reason: A Commemoration* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967] p. 43).

98. Indeed, Ferguson tended to regard wealth and civic virtue as directly linked: "The wealth," he commented, "the aggrandizement and power of nations, are commonly the effects of virtue; the loss of these advantages, is often a consequence of vice" (*Essay*, p. 206).

99. A useful analysis of Ferguson's theory of progress appears in Jules Delvaille, *Essai sur l'histoire de l'idée de progrès* (Paris: Alcan & Guillaumin, 1910), pp. 475–6.

unnatural,” Ferguson concluded, “the cottage is so no less; and the highest refinements of political and moral apprehension, are not more artificial in their kind, than the first operations of sentiment and reason.”¹⁰⁰

All this is not to deny that Ferguson dealt extensively with the harmful effects of the increasing division of labor that marked advanced commercial societies. These effects he regarded as possessing the potential of producing a permanent subordination of rank, thus allowing for the rise of despotism.¹⁰¹ “Many mechanical arts,” he wrote,

require no capacity; they succeed best under a total suppression of sentiment and reason; and ignorance is the mother of industry as well as of superstition. Reflection and fancy are subject to err; but a habit of moving the hand, or the foot, is independent of either. Manufactures, accordingly, prosper most, where the mind is least consulted, and where the workshop may, without any great effort of imagination, be considered as an engine, the parts of which are men.¹⁰²

The ever-greater specialization of labor, Ferguson feared, could lead to a system of stratification in which thinking itself might become the particular province of a privileged class:

But if many parts in the practice of every art, and in the detail of every department, require no abilities, or actually tend to contract and to limit the views of the mind, there are others which lead to general reflections, and to enlargement of thought. Even in manufacture, the genius of the master, perhaps, is cultivated, while that of the inferior workman lies waste. The statesman may have a wide comprehension of human affairs, while the tools he employs are ignorant of the system in which they are themselves combined. The general officer may be a great proficient in the art of war, while the soldier is confined to a few motions of the hand and the foot. . . .

The practitioner of every art and profession may afford matter of general speculation to the man of science; and thinking itself, in this age of separations, may become a peculiar craft.¹⁰³

In elaborating the consequences of the division of labor, however, Ferguson did not conclude that it would inevitably prove to be a Trojan horse whose ultimate social effect would invariably be the destruction of a free and virtuous society. Although the division of labor might well place strains upon the social fabric and make possible a permanent subordination of the many by the few, it also facilitates the fullest expression of each individual’s natural abilities and personal excellences and hence serves a particularly valuable moral and social purpose. “With the benefit of commerce, . . . [and the division of labor which naturally accompanies it],” Ferguson noted, “every individual is enabled to avail himself, to the utmost, of the peculiar advantage of his place; to work on the peculiar ma-

100. *Essay*, p. 8.

101. Ferguson’s views respecting the dangers arising out of the division of labor are discussed at some length in Forbes, “Ferguson and the Idea of Community,” pp. 40–7, and Ronald Hamowy, “Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and the Division of Labour,” *Economica*, xxxv(1968):249–59.

102. *Essay*, pp. 182–83.

103. *Essay*, p. 183.

terials with which nature has furnished him; to humour his genius or disposition, and betake himself to the task in which he is peculiarly qualified to proceed.”¹⁰⁴

Ferguson’s response to the question of whether the dangers inherent in commercial societies could be averted was unambiguous. So long as the members of the community take an active role in civic affairs, so long as they prevent the division of labor from embracing the more crucial aspects of political and military life,¹⁰⁵ it is possible to secure the nation against despotism. “It is difficult,” he wrote,

to tell how long the decay of states might be suspended by the cultivation of arts on which their real felicity and strength depend; by cultivating in the higher ranks those talents for the council and the field, which cannot, without great disadvantage, be separated; and in the body of a people, that zeal for their country, and that military character, which enable them to take a share in defending its rights.

Times may come, when every proprietor must defend his own possessions, and every free people maintain their own independence.¹⁰⁶

In sum, while it is true that commercial societies bring with them the risks of despotism in the form of an over-specialization of function and a permanent system of subordination, a decline into tyranny need not follow. The stifling of public involvement in the affairs of state—either through the throttling of individual capacity consequent on an extensive division of labor or out of an all-consuming concern solely for one’s private wealth—is, in the end, what makes despotism possible. Encourage the populace to actively participate in the civic and military affairs of the nation and tyranny can be averted. Man’s ability to uncover the laws that determine his condition¹⁰⁷ provides him the opportunity to avoid what might otherwise be regarded as that corruption to which all commercial societies must descend.

104. *Principles*, II, p. 424.

105. Ferguson was a strong supporter of a civilian army and had written tracts pointing out the serious dangers consequent on a professional military and calling for the establishment of a civilian militia. See his *Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia* (London: R. & J. Dodsley, 1756), published anonymously. The benefits of a militia over a mercenary army, he contended, were several and obvious. While a professional military force could act as the tool of a government intent on depriving the citizens of their rights and subjecting them to despotic measures, a civilian militia would invariably thwart such designs. More importantly, the citizen who had abdicated from active civic and military involvement in his community could not but be a poor citizen, open to the depredations of a corrupt regime at home while incompetently protected by a mercenary army against attack from abroad.

While a number of his fellow Scots supported a variety of schemes for a militia which called for compulsory participation, the plan put forward by Ferguson in his *Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia* appears to have favored voluntary involvement. His proposal called for legislation ending certain restraints on the use of arms, such as the Game Laws, in addition to permitting freeholders the right to arm one man. For a detailed discussion of the militia question in eighteenth-century Scotland, see John Robertson, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1985).

106. *Essay*, p. 227.

107. “Man is by nature an artist,” Ferguson noted, “endowed with ingenuity, discernment, and will. These faculties he is qualified to employ on different materials; but is chiefly concerned to em-

With respect to the dangers of despotism, commercial societies present no greater risks than do those more primitive communities that preceded them. "In the lowest state of commercial arts," Ferguson observed,

the passions for wealth, and for dominion, have exhibited scenes of oppression, or servility, which the most finished corruption of the arrogant, the cowardly, and the mercenary, founded on the desire of procuring, or the fear of losing, a fortune, could not exceed. In such cases, the vices of men, unrestrained by forms, and unawed by police, are suffered to riot at large, and to produce their entire effects. Parties accordingly unite, or separate, on the maxims of a gang of robbers; they sacrifice to interest the tenderest affections of human nature. The parent supplies the market for slaves, even by the sale of his own children; the cottage ceases to be a sanctuary for the weak and the defenceless stranger; and rites of hospitality, often so sacred among nations in their primitive state, come to be violated, like every other tie of humanity, without fear or remorse.¹⁰⁸

A number of commentators have confused Ferguson's fears regarding the dangers of political indifference with a basic animosity towards commercial activity. But the fact is that Ferguson offered a strong defense of commercial society throughout his writings.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, his distrust could with justice be said to center not on commercial society itself but on the various efforts by politicians to intervene in economic life with the end of improving it. These attempts, no matter how well-meaning, almost always resulted in hindering the production of wealth. "In matters of particular profession, industry, and trade," wrote Ferguson, "the experienced practitioner is the master, . . . When the refined politician would lend an active hand, he only multiplies interruptions and grounds of complaint."¹¹⁰

ploy them on himself: Over this subject his power is most immediate and most complete; as he may know the law, according to which his progress is effected, by conforming himself to it, he may, hasten or secure the result" (*Principles*, I, p. 200).

108. *Essay*, p. 242.

109. Kettler has concluded of Ferguson's discussions of commerce that "in the final analysis and on the basis of the most central feature of the activist conception of virtue, Ferguson's position eventuated in a vindication of commercial society" (Kettler, *Thought of Adam Ferguson*, p. 236). And, with particular reference to Ferguson's *Essay*, Roy Harvey Pearce has observed that one reason for its popularity, especially among Americans, was Ferguson's unambiguous defense of commercial society over more primitive cultures, despite the social costs that might accompany civilization. "What generally emerges from Ferguson's *Essay*, and from others like it," he notes, "is a simple and clear demonstration from conjectural history of a proposition which Americans, in their feelings of pity and censure over the fate of the Indians, needed desperately to believe; that men in becoming civilized had gained much more than they had lost; and that civilization, the act of civilizing, for all of its destruction of primitive virtues, put something higher and greater in their place" (*The Savages of America: A Study of the Indian and the Idea of Civilization* [rev. ed.; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965], p. 85).

110. *Essay*, p. 144. Consider also the following: "Men are tempted to labour, and to practise lucrative arts, by motives of interest. Secure to the workman the fruit of his labour, give him the prospects of independence or freedom, the public has found a faithful minister in the acquisition of

We live in an age dominated by sociology and politics, when moral philosophy and economics are less exciting and of less concern than they were two centuries ago. Accordingly, contemporary scholarship often tends to emphasize certain of Ferguson's observations relating to his fears of despotism at the expense of his conclusions respecting man's moral perfectability and of the value, both moral and economic, of the unhampered activities of the market. Nevertheless, these aspects of Ferguson's thought were of greater concern to him. In this sense, at least to his contemporaries, Ferguson shared the attributes of what one historian has labeled the "new-model man,"¹¹¹ having embraced a regime of commerce within a political system in which citizens were active participants in civic life.

From the standpoint of current scholarship in the social sciences, it would be hard to argue against the view that Ferguson's most significant and lasting contribution was his formulation of the theory of spontaneously-generated orders and the application of this theory to a whole range of complex social phenomena, including law and language. Of slightly lesser, but unquestionably enduring, consequence is Ferguson's analysis of the social effects of the increasing division of labor. However, it was not until the nineteenth century that these aspects of Ferguson's thought were fully appreciated. The eighteenth century was to derive from Ferguson's works more positive elements there discussed: the benefits of a society based on commerce, the need for a public-spirited and vigilant citizenry as a bulwark against tyranny, and the possibilities of unbounded progress towards moral perfection to which mankind naturally inclined.

wealth, and a faithful steward in hoarding what he has gained. The statesman in this, as in the case of population itself, can do little more than avoid doing mischief. It is well, if, in the beginnings of commerce, he knows how to repress the frauds to which it is subject. Commerce, if continued, is the branch in which men committed to the effects of their own experience, are least apt to go wrong" (*Essay*, p. 143).

111. Ralph Lerner, "Commerce and Character: The Anglo-American as New-Model Man," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., xxxvi(1979):3-26.