ADAM FERGUSON’S REPUBLICANISM

INTRODUCTION

This article has two aims. First, it presents an analysis of Adam Ferguson’s concept of civil society and polity in the context of the civic republican tradition which originated in Aristotle and the philosophy of stoicism. The civil society tradition began in ancient Greece and Ferguson renewed the concept in modern times. The contemporary revival of the idea of civil society brings back the old questions about the nature of a good and free society. I argue that Ferguson’s critical reflections on society and citizenship was much influenced by the classical republican tradition that can still be inspiring today. The second aim is to present a methodological argument that concerns the contemporary relevance of the philosophical concepts of politics that belong to the traditions of political thought, and the way we should theorize about them.

Adam Ferguson, a Scottish moralist and the author of *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), applied the concept of civil society to modern political theory. He understood it as a polished and refined society and characterised it as having reached a certain stage of social, political, and economic advancement. In other words, civil society was a product of civilization, it was a civilized society. Such view differs from today’s predominant views in which civil society is frequently viewed in terms of associationism. As a political moralist and a founder of sociology, Ferguson based his analysis of the progress of society on a historical and sociological rather than a purely philosophical reflection. In order to uncover his ideas to a contemporary reader, I should like to illuminate the manner in which the history of political thought and contemporary political theory have influenced one another. My approach is based on the assumption that our reflection on politics does not arise *ex nihilo* and does not de-

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develop in a vacuum simply because the political concepts that we use today are a part of the long tradition of thinking. It can of course be argued that even if the concepts that are used today, such as democracy or civil society, have the same names, they are not the same in semantic terms and their current meanings can hardly be derived from their historical meanings and uses. Quentin Skinner has argued in his works on the methodology of the history of ideas, 'there is no hope of seeking the point of studying the history of ideas in the attempt to learn directly from the classical authors by focusing on their attempted answers to supposedly timeless questions.' I would take issue with this view and argue that when we use political ideas today we are crucially dependent upon our traditions of political thought and that by reflecting on our philosophical predecessors we can expand our own visions of politics. The question thus addressed concerns the role of the history of political thought as a discipline and the mode of thinking about both the past and the present.

Since the late 1960s much of the research on the history of political thought has been highly specialised and had very little if anything to say about the relevance of the tradition of political thought to problems faced by political theory today. This specialisation was influenced by the methodological debate that began in the 1960s and was concerned with the importance of the meaning and context in the history of ideas. The main lesson of this debate was the famous statement made by Skinner that 'we must do our thinking for ourselves;' classic texts in political philosophy have not been written in order to give us instructions and we can hardly learn from them as to how we should theorise about current social and political issues. This essay is not an attempt to seek for instruction what can be derived from Ferguson's thought; instead, my analysis aims to draw some conclusions about the lessons we can learn from the close study of the questions and concerns which Ferguson addressed in his works. I do not suggest that there is an explicit connection between the questions faced by the political philosophers in the eighteenth century and by contemporary political thinkers, nor that we can find in Ferguson or Adam Smith possible answers to them, but only that the tradition of political thought, despite its partiality, is our tradition, and the questions that it poses are challenged by us as its descendants.

CIVILIZATION AND PROGRESS

The main concern of Ferguson and such prominent Scottish thinkers of the eighteenth century as Lord Kames, John Millar, and William Robertson, was an attempt to create categories for the explanation of material, economic, and social

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4 Q. Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding…', p. 66.
progress. Ferguson argued that progress was a measure of civilization; mankind aimed to remove inconveniences in order to gain advantages, which would lead to an improvement in its present stage of development, and would arrive at ends that could not be planned, such as the foundation of civil laws and political establishments. The progress of civilization is spontaneous and gradual; it is a hard process of trial and error, the empiricist approach shared by Scottish moralists suggested. Whether it is a barbarian or a polished condition, no government can be constructed from a plan. If we looked back at the history of mankind, we would notice that the progress of society, civilization, has never been predictable, and has never been the result of a single project or projects. Social organization and different types of government emerged out of the natural differences between people. Civil society developed spontaneously along with the refinement of manners, the development of commerce, and the division of labour. Ferguson traces the progress of man through various stages of society – from primitive savagery to advanced civilization – viewing society as a dynamic, changing pattern of behaviour reflected in its institutional arrangements. In his account of the refinement of nations, Ferguson does not identify specific causes of the progress from a barbarous to a polished society but stresses two features of such a progress: its gradualness and its spontaneous character. In this he continues Mandeville’s evolutionary account of society.

Like Montesquieu, Ferguson emphasises that there are different forms of government which fit different social conditions and suit the needs of people: ‘Forms of government are supposed to decide of the happiness or misery of mankind. But forms of government must vary in order to suit the extent, the way, and the manners of different nations.’ In emerging from rudeness and simplicity individuals learn to subordinate themselves to rules and customs. The development of private property, which is considered by Ferguson to be a feature of progress, distinguishes rude and barbarous nations from the ones in the advanced states of the mechanic and commercial arts. Following Locke, Ferguson finds the origin of property in labour. The right which is derived from it is viewed as the right of possession or property: ‘It is a right, in the labourer, to the exclusive use of his powers, and of their lawful effects, even during the intermissions of that use.’ Property combined with reflection and

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foresight makes the individual care about his interest. ‘He apprehends a relation between his person and his property, which renders what he calls his own in a manner a part of himself, a constituent of his rank, his condition, and his character, in which, independent of any real enjoyment, he may be fortunate or unhappy [...]’. Although Ferguson viewed property rights and their protection as a necessary condition for the individual freedom of citizens, it was Hume that first provided the insight that property must be founded on justice, for the relationship between man and his property is not natural but moral. The distinction of property and the stability of possession are ‘the most necessary to the establishment of human society’ as well as to ‘perfect harmony and concord within a nation.’ Justice, based on a convention, although its single acts might be contrary to the public interest, was seen as a highly beneficial requisite for the support of society and the well-being of every individual.

Ferguson rejected the ‘diffusionist’ theory of civilization according to which civilization is seen as transmitted from nation to nation from its original source in Egypt. Nations borrow from their neighbours only those inventions that they can easily adopt since their conditions are nearly the same. ‘Any singular practice of one country is seldom transferred to another, till the way be prepared by the introduction of similar circumstances.’ In every society the pursuit of perfection creates a condition of progress although not every society is progressive. In polished societies the separation of professions has led to the improvement of skills and the advance of commerce and production. As a consequence ‘the sources of wealth are laid open’ and the greatest perfection in civil and commercial arts can flourish. For liberal and mechanistic engagements require different talents, the division of labour results in the general improvement of professions and also in the hierarchy of ranks. The term ‘polished’ is used by Ferguson to describe not only the state of nations in respect to their laws and government but also to ‘their proficiency in the liberal and mechanical arts, in literature, and in commerce.’

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10 Idem, An Essay, p. 12. A similar account of property was developed later by Hegel in his Philosophy of Right (especially § 51-53).
12 Ibid., p. 319.
15 Ibid., pp. 180-181.
16 Ibid., p. 205.
mix with animosity; the active and strenuous become the guardians of their society; and violence itself is, in their case, an exertion of generosity as well as of courage.17 War, as it is viewed by Ferguson, strengthens the bonds of societies and the national spirit and it can also be considered to be a builder of moral and internal unity. Never the less, despite his positive view of war, Ferguson had no doubt that although in itself war was not a corrupt institution, it could often be corrupted.

The strong affinity between Ferguson’s position and that of the founders of the classical republican tradition, especially Aristotle, can be found in his account of progress understood not only in terms of technological development but also as a moral improvement. If there is no doubt that ‘the wealth, the aggrandizement, and power of nations, are commonly the effects of virtue; the loss of these advantages, is often a consequence of vice,’18 then Mandeville’s argument on the beneficial results of human vices, expressed in the Fable of the Bees seems to be false. Political life, which civic humanists saw as a distinctive and central part of every citizen’s life, necessitates men’s intellectual and moral power. Ferguson stresses that progress would not be possible without man’s constant search for perfection, understood as the realization of man’s full human nature within a political society and as an act of choice.19 Virtue and the cultivation of moral sentiments play the key role in the development of a civil society while the strength of the state depends not on its wealth but above all on the virtue of its citizens. This idea is undoubtedly both Aristotelian and Stoic in its inspiration. Man considered as zoon politikon, ‘by nature the member of a community,’ an individual considered as being part of a whole, needs to be seen in the context of this wider whole.20 Our duties towards others and towards our political community are derived from our participation in and belonging to a wider whole that develops naturally and not artificially, on the basis of a contract or rational agreement among individuals. This anti-contractarian stance Ferguson shares with other Scottish moralists, notably with Hume and Smith. ‘Civilization,’ as he stresses in the Principles of Moral and Political Science, is reflected in the effects of law and political establishments rather than to ‘any station of lucrative possession of wealth.’21 The criterion of civilization is thus political whereas the term ‘civil society’ describes a state of society polished and refined but also relates to its economic and political establishments. Not every advanced society can be called ‘civil’ but only those in which individuals can enjoy civil liberty under a government that protects their rights; but it is not just the protection of rights as in a liberal account, that contributes to this more advanced stage of development. Ferguson also stresses the role of the civil or political liberty of citizens – the practice of citizenship as one of the main attributes of a civil society.

17 Ibid., pp. 24-25.
18 Ibid., p. 206.
Both the progress and the decline of society cannot be foreseen, but there are some observable factors that make its decay predictable. In his Essay Ferguson expressed concern over the threats that a flourishing civilization had to face in modern times. Advanced societies can be characterised by a plurality of opinions and a range of knowledge that are encountered among different levels of society. But what was the real worth of a civilization which had been purchased through commerce and individuals’ pursuit of wealth, as well as their preoccupation with their own interests? The refinements of the polished age are not free of danger. In his account of progress, Ferguson observes a ‘dialectic’ of virtue and corruption, of the rise and fall of nations. ‘The virtues of man have shown most during their struggles, not after the attainment of their ends. Those ends themselves, though attained by virtue, are frequently the causes of corruption and vice.’

One of the main attributes of a commercial society – the separation of professions – affects particularly those who should make up the political class. Commerce and specialisation brought about the whole progress of cultural, moral, and material civilization. But as long as individuals – morally and politically autonomous human beings – move away from the characteristics of zōon politikon, corruption of republican virtues is inevitable. If citizens retain virtù, itself understood as a moral virtue, and give up civic values that characterise the political virtue of citizens, they must regress towards the condition of tribesman.

Ferguson’s account of progress in society demonstrates very clearly how virtue in its classical sense can be destroyed by the growth of society itself. Though he did not try to find a solution to all problems generated by a commercial society, he was aware of the tragic sense of contradiction built into the historical process. This preoccupation is well expressed in his analysis of the concept of civil society and the role of civic virtues in a modern polity.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND CIVIC VIRTUES: THE HERITAGE OF THE CLASSICAL REPUBLICAN TRADITION

As I noted above, Ferguson’s understanding of society differs from the view of his predecessors, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, and, above all else, signifies a break with the state of nature and social contract theory, for ‘it appears from the history of mankind, that men have always acted in troops and companies; that they have apprehended a good of the community, as well as of the individual; that while they practise arts, each for his own preservation, they institute a political form, and unite their forces, for common safety.’ In the Essay Ferguson stresses that ‘man is, by nature the

member of community; and when considered in this capacity the individual appears
to be no longer made for himself. Adam Ferguson’s... Individual freedom and happiness might interfere
with the good of society but it is the latter that should prevail. The public good should
be considered as the principle object of an individual’s endeavours and the happiness
of individuals as the great end of civil society. In a similar manner to Hume, Ferguson
argues that the state of nature is a mere abstraction since man was formed for society
and always existed within a community. Furthermore, man is not only a social being
but also a political being: ‘Society is the natural state of man, and political society is
the natural result of his experience in that state of society to which he is born.’
This experience begins with the genesis of every society and is accumulated through the
ages. Similarly, political establishments are the result of a gradual formation and the
experience of generations. If Hobbes is right and all the obligations of men in society
rest upon a supposed original contract, it will be difficult to find a foundation for
the contract itself. Social organization and political institutions emerge spontaneously out of the diversity of talents and passions and from the natural necessity to act
in company. Unlike Hobbes, Ferguson ascribes natural rights to every person stating
that ‘original rights’ are personal and express ‘what everyone from his birth is entitled
to defend in himself, and what no one has a right to invade in another.’ In accordance with the liberal tradition, Ferguson views the establishment of government as
the foundation of coercive laws, which define and protect rights and privileges. In
modern Europe the political and commercial arts have been so interwoven that the
promulgation of laws was necessary in order to regularise the acquisition and exchange
of property. It is, however, not clear what the right source of positive law is in the
work of the Scottish moralists, including Ferguson. Is it simply derived from the fact
of natural human sociability and the ability of men to develop institutional structures
that best suit the achievement of their goals, or is there a deeper foundation, as was
advanced by Cicero, located in natural law? If it is ‘reality,’ ‘facts,’ ‘reason’ and ‘science’
that all our reasoning must be founded upon, we must then turn to the evidence,
which suggests that the latest efforts of human invention are but a continuation of
certain devices that were practised in the earliest ages of the world, and in the rudest
state of mankind. Than the most obvious source of positive law would be custom and
not natural law. Interestingly, Ferguson insists, on the one hand, on the universality
of human nature, and on the other, on the diversity of social and political institutions
and ideals, and here he is closer to Aristotle than to Cicero.

The classical republican view of politics, which still finds many followers today,
addresses the problem of freedom among human beings who are necessarily interdepen-dent, and it proposes that both individual and political freedom may be realised

27 Ibid., p. 221.
28 Ibid., p. 196.
29 Ibid., pp. 8-9.
through membership of a political community. What matters in a healthy republic is a set of political, social, and economic conditions that are necessary for civil and individual liberty to flourish. These conditions are not understood in purely formal or institutional terms, but as being supported by the legal and civic culture of a society and the value of citizenship. The republican model has a normative character and is viewed as a desirable ideal rather than something that could easily be put into practice. But it is important to stress that the contemporary inheritors of classical republicanism try to build on this tradition in order to provide a new normative and valuable perspective on contemporary politics. They hold the belief that normative ideas are of great importance in political life, although they are also aware of the practical limitations that republican political ideas have to face in today’s liberal-democratic societies. The link between classical, modern, and contemporary republicanism is not unproblematic. When we look at the problem of corruption – which is crucial in Ferguson’s account – we need to go back to the insight of classical republicans, especially Machiavelli who saw corruption as being one of the primary political problems and understood the very term quite broadly. Most often what they meant by this term was either a moral deterioration or decay, depravity, or the perversion of, say, an institution or custom from its sound condition, a deviation from principle. This broad meaning also included corruption as the perversion of the integrity and fidelity of a person in his discharge of duty. A crucial thesis of republican theory, which must be introduced at the beginning of our analysis, is the conviction that freedom is a social, and not asocial, condition. Therefore, ‘if vice and corruption prevail, liberty cannot subsist; but if virtue has the advantage, arbitrary power cannot be established.’ This argument was most powerfully made by Machiavelli who saw freedom as something to be realised only in a political community and emphasised the role of formative institutions as a part of what freedom entails. Since it endangers the pursuit of the common good in the republic, corruption undermines civic liberty and greatness and always means a loss of freedom and thus slavery. In this manner, contemporary advocates of republicanism try to reconnect freedom with the common good of citizenship, understood in terms of public spiritedness, public duties, and as a mode of action, and not exclusively in terms of individual rights.

The most vital and the most disturbing question for republican writers is still the same: ‘How can naturally self-interested citizens be persuaded to act virtuously,

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such that they can hope to maximize a freedom which, left to themselves, they will
infallibly throw away? A theory informed by the preoccupation that this question
expresses is at odds with the prevailing liberal beliefs based on a strong conception of
justice as fairness, with the dominance of the concepts of self-interest and individual
rights, and without clear reference to the importance of the public arena in securing
those rights and liberties. It is also at odds with a Schumpeterian-type democratic
theory, according to which a liberal society does not demand much from its citizens.

To republican writers there was no doubt that under a corrupt system corruption
there will in the end be no rights at all. Accordingly, the republican vivere politic
makes stringent demands on not only those who are in power, but also on citizens;
a healthy polity demands the habits of civic virtue and public morality. As Quentin
Skinner asserts, to be corrupt according to this republican insight, is to fail to under-
stand ‘something which it is profoundly in our interest to remember: that if we wish
to enjoy as much freedom as we can hope to attain within political society, there is
a good reason for us to act in the first instance as virtuous citizens, placing the com-
mon good above the pursuit of any individual or factional ends.’

Ferguson’s account of society demonstrates his affinity with the civic tradition,
influenced especially by Cicero, which viewed a human being as a social and politi-
cal animal, and as a member of a community rather than as an individual, and his
view of civil society should be seen in this context. Civic virtue, the key concept in
classical republican thought, refers to the particular role of a person – the role of
a citizen. It is a disposition to act in accordance with the standards and expectation
that define good citizenship. Civic virtue is a disposition which fosters the public
over private good in action and deliberation. The civic concept which Ferguson
and other Scottish thinkers developed from Machiavelli and his republican followers
was adapted by them to the new discourse about modern commercial society, about
progress, virtue, and wealth in political society. The ideas of active participation and
civic virtue in Scotland interacted with the concepts of freedom, property, and jus-
tice derived from the natural law tradition, reflected in the theories of Locke and
Montesquieu. The civic tradition of the classical and particularly the Aristotelian
origin focused on the institutional, moral, and material condition of a free citizen-
ship in a political community. In this tradition, political community was defined by
the possession of a civil government and militia that secured the freedom of citizens
to participate in political life and the defence of their community. In order to take
advantage of their freedom and participation, citizens must be capable of a moral vir-

Machiavelli and Republicanism, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK)–New York 1990,
p. 305.
36 Ibid., p. 304.
37 R. Dagger, Civic Virtues: Rights, Citizenship, and Republican Liberalism, Oxford University Press,
38 See F. Oz-Salzberger, Translating the Enlightenment. Scottish Civic Discourse in Eighteenth-Century
tue and be willing to commit themselves to public life.\textsuperscript{39} The fulfilment of the conditions of citizenship depended upon the possession of material independence and autonomy. In turn, if citizens valued private benefits and their own interests more than the public good, it led to corruption which would prove to be fatal for political institutions.

Scottish philosophers of the eighteenth century found the civic tradition as defined above to be applicable to the social circumstances of advanced commercial society. Whereas Adam Smith and David Hume tried to adapt this tradition to the positive pursuit of wealth, Ferguson saw its concepts as an antidote to the danger of corruption and the loss of virtue in commercial society. Conversely, Smith, for whom the individual’s self-interested pursuit of wealth – their desire of ‘bettering [their] condition’ – was a motor for the progress of society, saw first and foremost obstacles to universal citizenship in the circumstances of commercial society.\textsuperscript{40} Ferguson, in contrast, was preoccupied with the problems of advanced commercial society, especially the coexistence of wealth and virtue. His notion of corruption and civic virtue was rooted in stoic and Machiavelli’s thought, but his analysis of morality was in both economic and ethical terms distinctly modern. He emphasised in the \textit{Principles} that Stoic philosophy was the source from which ‘the better part of Roman law was derived’ and to which ‘jurisprudence must ever recur.’ Both Hume’s and Smith’s theories were to break with the civic humanist tradition, mainly by abandoning the notions of a political community and citizens’ militia.\textsuperscript{41} Ferguson argued against Smith that although wealth and luxury were not in themselves immoral and that progress could be an unintended consequence of commercial selfishness, civic participation in public life and military valour could not become a matter of a separate profession which involved only a few. Furthermore, no system of laws, either of political or of natural laws could itself preserve a political society, as liberals believed. Without the maintenance of civic virtue the strength and vitality of a political community can be easily eroded. Even the best political institutions are not a sufficient device to maintain the liberty of individuals: ‘the liberties they enjoy cannot be long preserved, without vigilance and activity on the part of the subject.’\textsuperscript{42} Without civic participation and patriotism the government of a commercial society might easily become despotic and its manners corrupted. Civic participation was for Ferguson a moral necessity and a ‘basic truth’ of civil society as such. Political freedom presupposed civil liberties but it would not exist without political participation. Political refinements might secure the persons and their property without any regard to their


\textsuperscript{42} A. Ferguson, \textit{An Essay}, p. 56.
political character, ‘the constitution indeed may be free’, but ‘its members may likewise become unworthy of the freedom they possess, and unfit to preserve it’; 43 ‘the character of man, their reason and the heart are best cultivated in the exercise of social duties, and in the conduct of public affairs’. 44 Such institutions as personal freedom, secured property, and individual rights are insufficient if they are divorced from the civic concept of virtue and active citizenship. One of Ferguson’s main preoccupations was the political passivity of a polished society. Political freedom and participation were the labels of a good form of government and of a free state.

Another aspect of Ferguson’s theory of virtue within civil society that is worth emphasising is his view of commercial society which he contrasted with one in which military honour was central. Ferguson has laid the intellectual foundations of the case for a Scottish militia in his Reflections previous to the Establishment of a Militia (1756). The issue of the militia plays a very significant role also in his Essay. As David Kettler concluded, participation in national defence was for Ferguson one of the few means by which members of commercial society might act to maintain its progress. 45 Ferguson’s discussion on the militia illustrates clearly that patriotism was important for politics and that military engagement was seen as a great school of civic virtue. He believed that the most important context for the practice of citizenship was military training and public defence. 46

The departments of civil government and of war being separated, and the pre-eminence being given to the statesman, the ambitious will naturally devolve the military service on those who are contented with a subordinate station. They who have the greatest share in the division of fortune, and the greatest interest in defending their country, having resigned the sword, must pay for what they have ceased to perform […] A discipline is invented to inure the soldiers to perform, from habit and from the fear of punishment, those hazardous duties, which the love of the public or a national spirit, no longer inspire. […] to separate the arts which form the citizen and the statesman, the arts of policy and war, is an attempt to dismember human character, and to destroy those very arts we mean to improve. By this separation, we in effect deprive a free people of what is necessary to their safety. 47

His insistence on the need to sustain the virtue of higher ranks makes the Essay rest on civic principles. His theory of man in society was a response to Rousseau and his account of civil society was formulated as a critique of Hobbes. Ferguson also addressed thinkers such as Montesquieu, Mandeville, Hume and Smith. Arguing vigorously against some of their ideas, he insisted that classical civic concepts focusing on active citizenry and political participation were still valid and their practical applica-

43 Ibid., pp. 221-222.
44 Idem, Institutes, p. 291.
tion was necessary in a commercial society, since any political community might not be free and prosperous without them.

Ferguson renewed modern interest in the term of civil society, which was so powerfully adopted later on by Hegel, but, unlike liberals, he did not place it outside political establishments; civil society as discussed in the Essay was understood as a polity itself or as a political community and it was conceived, above all, in civic and political terms, as a locus of the exercise of political virtue. In conducting the affairs of civil society mankind can pursue their best talents and find the objects of their best affection. Civil society was thus formulated as a positive concept, as a moral category, a measure of social advancement. It was always there as a mode of human existence and a social bond. For both Smith and Ferguson, civil society meant a realm of solidarity based on moral sentiments, a natural propensity towards active citizenship, and concern about the public good. Hegel's distinction between civil society and the state, the distinction between the private sphere of the economy and the public sphere of government was completely alien to the civic tradition advocated by Ferguson. Unlike his contemporaries, Voltaire and Hume, Ferguson believed that even highly developed societies were in danger of retreating into despotism and was not concerned with demonstrating that mankind moves along a preconditioned course towards a noble future.

The central thesis of the Essay seems to call attention to political responsibility and the civic virtue of citizens, and also to the dangers of unrestrained trust in political institutions and laws. These preoccupations of Ferguson remain relevant. When the separation of arts and privacy have replaced community and publicity, when social man is replaced by public man, public life marked by a corruption of manners and apathy could not hold despotism at bay. It was a new type of despotism, a danger to political and individual liberty as it was viewed in the classical republican tradition. For Montesquieu laws supported the fabric of society and freedom of individuals, while in Hume's theory and also in his philosophical history, liberty was understood as law and order and the history of liberty was the history of the progress of society.

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48 Primarily, the concept of civil society was understood as a political community (union) of free citizens in a city-state or a modern state. The crucial characteristic of this classical concept was a lack of distinction between the state and society. In the eighteenth century, when political economy redefined civil society as a sphere of free, self-interested individuals, civil society was considered as being distinct from the state, and, especially in German philosophy of the nineteenth century, as opposed to it. In Ferguson's theory, civil society is understood first and foremost as the locus of material civilization and social and intellectual progress. He contrasted 'civil' not with 'natural' but with 'rude'. Civil society developed as a result of the slow process of refinement and improvement of arts, trade, and military culture. Rude nations were shaped into civil society through 'the policy of government of their country; their education, knowledge, and habits' and these factors had 'great influence in forming their characters'. A. Ferguson, Institutes, p. 170. Cf. M. Riedel, 'Gesellschaft Bürgerliche' in O. Brunner, W. Conze, R. Koselleck (eds.), Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe, E. Klett, Stuttgart 1975.


50 F. Oz-Salzeberger, 'Introduction', p. xviii.
He knew that there is no true liberty without the rule of law which would guarantee personal freedom and security. In his essay ‘Of the Origin of Government’ Hume remarked that man was naturally inclined not only to form society but also that he naturally progresses to establish a political community in order to administer justice. A government’s main purpose is the distribution of justice and thus peace, safety and mutual intercourse in society. In Hume’s view public liberty is the guarantee of personal liberty and the security of the individual. Moreover, all the arts and sciences arose among free nations such as the ancient Greeks; the decline of liberty causes also the decline of letters and the spread of total barbarism. It is impossible for the arts and sciences to arise, among any people, unless they enjoy the blessing of a free government. Similarly, only under a free government can commerce flourish. Ferguson was a more cautious observer; although he acknowledged the beneficial influence of laws on social stability and saw their creation as a demarcation of a civil state, he emphasised that mere laws cannot preserve liberty. The rights of citizens and their obligations must be accompanied by ‘the vigour to maintain what is acknowledged as a right.’ In fact, for Ferguson liberty was in great danger in the modern, commercial state, where government was preoccupied only with the security of the person and property, and citizens are preoccupied with the pursuit of their own interests. Liberty also meant a firm liberal spirit that could not be superseded by any political establishments, for these were not sufficient as a means for the preservation of freedom.

In Ferguson’s account, civil society was comprehended as a moral order and thus proved that his theory had an affinity with the classical republican tradition. The crucial issue he was concerned with was not the question of what was natural and what was unnatural, but what was moral and immoral, just or unjust, happy or wretched. Man does not have to choose between wealth and virtue since human society has a great obligation to both and they are not opposed to one another. In modern European nations a strong tendency could have been observed towards a shift from honour to interest, and this was one of the main concerns of Ferguson; that is, the corruption of manners. When people turn rather to their interests, when they concentrate on luxury and prefer its objects to their characters and their ranks, the corruption of manners may lead to a despotic government since it makes people unfit to enjoy liberty. Citizenship is based on good manners and virtues and hence is connected with liberty, with the preservation of the liberal spirit. The state cannot make a man virtuous, it is up to the individual, but at the same time ‘the disinterested love of the public is a principle without which some constitutions of government cannot subsist.’ There is no one particular order but many orders among

51 D. Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, part III.
53 A. Ferguson, An Essay, p. 166.
54 Ibid., p. 266.
55 Ibid., p. 158.
free people. Civil society cannot emerge suddenly, simply as a result of the establishment of some liberal and democratic institutions as opposed to authoritarian ones. It was a process requiring not only liberty and a free market economy, but also citizens who are interested not only in their private lives but in the public sphere as well. Moreover, Ferguson had no doubt that a free market may lead to a new kind of serfdom. In the twentieth century the liberal thinker Friedrich von Hayek was concerned with the entirely opposite phenomenon: the lack of a free market and social planning meant to him a ‘road to serfdom.’ But for Ferguson the danger lay with not just the free market itself, but a free market without any restraints, such as those which were the natural result of good manners and moral sentiments. He did not underestimate the benefits of life in an advanced society and its high material standard. As was argued above, Ferguson as a civic humanist shared a belief in classical political values. Good citizenship was for him both a moral imperative and crucial to the good condition of the state. He did not view the existence of a commercial society as being hopeless; he saw some supports which could improve it. These were, above all, the political education of the leadership and the cultivation of patriotic sentiments through institutions such as the militia. Moreover, civic participation was understood by Ferguson, and can still be understood, as an expression of political liberty, not only as the continuance of virtú. He did not deny the advantages that a commercial society could bring, but he was troubled by some aspects of the accompanying deferment of these virtues; in particular, by the implicit devaluation of an active public life. For Ferguson, despite the undoubted value of ‘modern liberty,’ the values of ‘ancient’ or ‘republican’ liberty still had its place in a modern society.

FERGUSON AND HIS SCOTTISH CONTEMPORARIES

Unlike Hume, Ferguson did not take the benefits of civilization for granted and was more preoccupied with the dangers accompanying the growth of commercial society of self-interested individuals. For Hume, satisfied with British society and its government, it was the enlightened pursuit of happiness, security of property, the rule of law, and freedom of thought that provided the measure of a prosperous society within which participation in politics is restricted because of the ignorance of the common people. He differs from Ferguson in his realistic account of society, especially in his break with both the civic and natural law traditions. Their accounts of freedom are also different, since for Hume the distinction between ‘personal freedom,’ understood as the passive rights of property in the private sphere, and ‘civil liberty’ based upon active citizenship, as the exercise of sovereignty is central in his political position.56 The argument that developed from this distinction was that in

commercial society personal freedom is more necessary than civil liberty which for some should be restrained. Justice became a substitute of Virtue. For Ferguson the rule of law was entirely consistent with the destruction of civil liberty under a despotic government; as a civic humanist he valued civil liberty much more highly than private freedom. ‘It is possible from an opinion that the virtue of men are secure, that some who turn from their attention to public affairs, think of nothing but the numbers and wealth of a people: it is from a dread of corruption, that others think of nothing but how to preserve the national virtues. Human society has great obligations to both. They are opposed to one another by mistake.’57 In civil society, then, we can have both wealth and virtue, but in fact – and Ferguson did not foresee this – in modern European societies participation and thus political liberty was based on wealth.

Arguably, it was Adam Smith who spoke, at least in some respects, the same language as Ferguson: in their vision there was no strict distinction between the public and the private, between the private interest and the public good. Hume’s philosophy and the subsequent theory of liberal individualism meant a departure from this tradition. This later tradition, as argued by Adam Seligman, meant a decline of thinking about civil society based on the unity of reason and moral sentiments.58 As a moral theorist, Smith showed interest in the modern discussion on society along with Mandeville and Ferguson. In the Scottish tradition, which was influenced by Aristotelian and stoic philosophy, man is seen primarily as a citizen. Smith underlines this characteristic of man as zoon politikon: ‘It is thus the man, who can subsist only in society, was fitted by nature to that situation for which he was made [...] Man, it has been said, has a natural love for society, and desires that the union of mankind should be preserved for its own sake.’59 The challenge set by Ferguson and Smith was to reflect the contradictions that, in particular, arise in a commercial society, and which are associated with the industrial revolution. They searched for an adequate explanation for the complexity of the modern form of civil society with its extensive inequalities and individualization. Both Ferguson and Smith stressed that commercial society does not merely lead to the corruption of manners, of people’s moral sentiments, through the conflict between virtue and self-interest, but also to an increase of industry, fairness in exchange, the employment of the means of persuasion and mutual interest.60 In the Theory of Moral Sentiments Smith argued in favour of the public virtue of justice, which is the basis for just exchanges and a well-ordered society where commerce and private virtues flourish. In his view civil society, in contrast to traditional forms of society, is a ‘society of strangers.’

57 A. Ferguson, An Essay, p. 146.
60 A. Ferguson, An Essay, p. 134.
CONCLUSION

Krishan Kumar argued that different concepts of civil society cannot be abstracted from particular social philosophies; when separated from them they become obsolete.61 Similarly, Adam Seligman concluded that since the social and philosophical conditions have changed drastically, the classical formulations of the idea of civil society based on the assumed synthesis of public and private concerns cannot solve the contradictions of modern democratic societies.62 If this is the case – we could ask – is studying political ideas fruitless, for they do not tell us anything about our own condition? Are we to study them only as historical phenomena, which nowadays are only a part of the tradition of political thinking? Certainly this approach has its advantages, but at the same time we cannot forget that the way we interpret historical ideas is influenced by our own situation and our own social and political circumstances that shape modes of our thinking. What we can do while dealing with classical ideas is not only to describe them as products of their epoch, but, first and foremost, to give the past a contemporary relevance by searching for the lessons we can learn from the history of political thought. What I wish to argue is not that all ideas have are relevant for contemporary discussion, but only that at least some of them can be still useful when theorising about the problems we face today.

Adam Ferguson’s theory can only be understood in relation not only to both David Hume and Adam Smith, but above all to the classical republican tradition. I did not attempt to address the question about Ferguson’s originality, although some major differences between his thought and that of his contemporaries, as well as predecessors, have been emphasised. The central objective of Ferguson’s work was to demonstrate on the one hand, that civil society is a great achievement of social and political development, though its progression is never guaranteed; and, on the other hand, that civic life presupposes full citizenship based on the active engagement of citizens. This objective was understood in terms of Ferguson’s affinity with the civic tradition.

Ferguson’s concept of civil society might seem archaic to a contemporary reader but when it is viewed in the broader context of civic tradition, as I was trying to do above, it proves to be rich in conclusions that can still be inspiring, especially for those who advocate a republican spirit in contemporary politics. For Ferguson the essence of a thriving civil society was demonstrated in terms of civic ideals, among which active citizenship and concern about the public good, and patriotism were predominant. The contradictions and uncertainties we face today in liberal democratic societies are, at least partly, the result of processes that worried Ferguson the most. The growth of commercial society, individualism, grandeur of personal liberty,

and recently globalisation have been accompanied by the decline of ideals, such as concern about the common good, active citizenry, or civil liberty. Instead of the language of political community politicians speak the language of individuals, men and women, or families. What Ferguson can teach us today, is that a society can be civil if individuals pursuing their aims through different forms of associations do not turn their back on the polity and its endeavours; if the public space and the private realm are not characterised by a huge gap between them.

Zygmunt Bauman notes in his book *In Search of Politics* that the *agora* – the space where the private and the public meet and where such ideals as the ‘public good’ may be born – ‘have been taken over and recycled into theme parks, while powerful forces conspire with political apathy to refuse building permits for new ones.’ Democratic politics makes citizens free but only allows them to act within the limited sphere of their own interests and concerns. The result of this process, as Bauman illuminates, is the insignificance of politics and the growing insecurity in individuals’ everyday lives. Many of Ferguson’s fears did not arise as a real danger but one of them, which seems to be central, is still with us: citizens’ lives cannot be meaningful outside the public space. Individual liberty should not stand in opposition to political liberty which can be practised only within a realm broader than the sphere of family and friends. On the other hand, political establishments themselves – as was often argued by Ferguson – when indifferent to citizens, may easily deepen the gap between the public and the private: ‘The political indifference and apathy of the citizens and the state retreating on its obligation to promote the common good are civil society’s unpleasant, yet legitimate children.’ If modern times have transformed the individual from a political citizen into a market consumer, depriving him of the vision of a space transcending his own concerns, perhaps a new theory of civil society can offer us a better understanding of our own condition. That insight should at the same time be a lesson from thinkers whose critical reflection about politics is not necessarily confined to their own epochs.

64 Ibid., p. 156.

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