

Savagery in 18th-Century Scotland: An Intellectual Portrait of Adam Ferguson

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In 1877, Lewis Henry Morgan (1985) proposed a scheme of universal human progress from savagery through barbarism to civilization. The idea of such a scheme, and even its terminology, were hardly original, but had been systematically elaborated by Scottish Enlightenment thinkers over a hundred years earlier (Meek 1976, Pocock 1999). Indeed, Morgan was well aware of these Scottish thinkers, many of whose books he kept in his personal library (Trautman and Kabelac 1994). Of the various Scottish attempts at writing universal history, Adam Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, published in 1767, was not the first but certainly the most influential and one of the most systematic.

Ferguson was a member of a distinguished circle of Scottish thinkers, most notably David Hume and Adam Smith, both of whom he counted as friends. He succeeded Hume as Keeper of the Advocates Library at the University of Edinburgh, where, like Adam Smith, he was later appointed to lecture. Unlike any of the others, he was, if not a full-blooded highlander, well acquainted with the Scottish Highlands and could even speak Gaelic. These ties influenced his early career, which was not at all at the University but rather as a minister to the celebrated regiment of Highlanders, the Black Watch. He accompanied the regiment when it was campaigning in Flanders, preaching to them in their native Gaelic. His military experience left a very discernable mark on his thought.

Ferguson is most remembered as one of the first and most important theoreticians of progress (e.g., Harris 1968, Nisbet 1969, Adams 1998). Indeed, in the very first paragraph of the *Essay*, he writes "... progress in the case of man is continued to a greater extent than in that of any other animal. Not only the individual advances from infancy to manhood, but the species itself from rudeness to civilization" (1767, p. 7). Such an insistence on the reality, indeed the inevitability, of progress is in sharp contrast to his French Enlightenment predecessors (Vyverberg 1958). Meek (1976) notes that Turgot had developed a stage theory of progress in the 1750s in an unfinished and at the time unpublished manuscript, *On Universal History*, but this would certainly have been unavailable to Ferguson.

Ferguson acknowledged his debt to earlier French thinkers, especially Montesquieu. He writes, somewhat coyly, "When I recollect what the President Montesquieu has written, I am at a loss to tell, why I should treat of human affairs (1767, p. 66.)". Where Ferguson deviates from Montesquieu most notably is his emphasis on "rude" nations – "barbarians" and above all "savages". Unlike many other French Enlightenment thinkers, Montesquieu displayed no interest whatsoever, either empirical or theoretical, in savagery. The different forms of society he contrasted – republics, monarchies, and despotisms – all constituted varieties of "civilization". On the other hand, Ferguson adamantly rejected earlier French paradigms of savagery that hinged on the identification of savages as relatively "natural" specimens of

humanity (Launay 2018). The obvious target of Ferguson's polemic is Rousseau, who nonetheless remains unnamed throughout the *Essay* except for one short and entirely unrelated passage. Ferguson specifically objects to the distinction between "natural" and "social" human beings so elaborately constructed in the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1985). He rejects Rousseau's paradigm of a natural, asocial humanity. Humans, Ferguson insists, are naturally social creatures. Any distinction between natural and social humanity is intrinsically misguided and misleading. Admittedly, Rousseau did not argue that savages were specimens of human beings in the state of nature. They were indeed social beings, but nonetheless closer to "nature" than European societies. Other French thinkers, Diderot for example, also posited a distinction between "natural" savage societies as "unnatural" European ones, a difference that Ferguson emphatically rejected.

Unlike Montesquieu, Ferguson attributed considerable theoretical weight to savage society. Unlike Rousseau, he was unwilling to theorize savagery in terms of the degree of conformity to or deviance from natural humanity. For Ferguson, all forms of society were equally, if differently, natural. Human nature, too, was invariable, at least in terms of human capabilities. Savages were neither more nor less moral, neither more nor less intelligent, than civilized persons, though the scope and content of their knowledge and their codes of morality were necessarily different.

Savagery, in short, was a stage rather than a state. Ferguson's *Essay* was the first extended exposition in print of the four-stage theory of the origins of civilization, from hunting to pastoralism to agriculture to commerce. Ferguson was not the first to formulate the theory, even in Scotland. His friend Adam Smith had already sketched out the theory in some detail in his lectures on jurisprudence in 1762–1763 at the University of Glasgow (Smith 1978). Ferguson was undoubtedly aware of Smith's ideas, though Smith did not bother to publish them at the time. In any case, the stage theory occupies a relatively small place at the beginning of Smith's voluminous lectures, as opposed to its central role in Ferguson's *Essay*. There is, as Pocock (1999) notes, an even more crucial difference. Smith posits a fundamental break between "the age of hunters" and "the age of shepherds". The domestication of animals permits the development of relatively important inequalities of wealth, inequalities that are moreover inheritable. Such inequalities are intrinsically dynamic, ultimately generating the other bases of inequality constituted by agriculture and commerce. Situating the critical break in these terms, Pocock suggests, creates a (possibly unintentional) divide between the Americas, without pastoralism and consequently static, and an intrinsically dynamic Eurasia. For Ferguson, on the other hand, the primary locus of difference was between "rude" societies, savages and barbarians together, and "civilized" societies based on agriculture and commerce. This is not to say that Ferguson was unaware of the economic as well as political inequalities that pastoralism generated, but he considered the social and political implications less stark, and consequently relativized the differences between the Old and New Worlds.

Although Ferguson considered agriculture, along with commerce, as one of the foundations of civilized society, he was well aware, as was Adam Smith before him, that the Native Americans who constituted his model of "savagery" grew domesticated crops. In this respect, Smith's and Ferguson's models differed significantly from nineteenth-century formulations

of stage theory, most notably Morgan's. For Morgan, the domestication of plants and animals marked the threshold between savagery and barbarism. The Iroquois were a central case for both Ferguson and Morgan, but for Ferguson, they were paradigmatic savages, while for Morgan they were evidently barbarians. Morgan also noted the almost total absence of domesticated animals in the New World, but like Ferguson and unlike Smith and others did not consider such a distinction very consequential. The classification of the Iroquois in particular and Native Americans in general as savages or barbarians epitomizes the very different ways in which Ferguson and nineteenth-century theorists understood "progress". For Morgan, technology was a reliable index (though not necessarily the driving force) of progress. For Ferguson, what mattered was "property", specifically the heritability of agricultural land and its consequences for the development of inherited inequalities. The Iroquois may have cultivated maize and other crops, but individual land ownership was never a mechanism of social differentiation. Jack Goody (1976) elaborated on the implications of such differences, basing his analysis on the difference between horticulture and plough cultivation. While Ferguson did not conceive the difference in terms of agricultural technology, his understanding of the difference between Iroquois cultivation and "agriculture" as one of the foundations of social inequality clearly anticipates Goody's schema.

Ferguson's appreciation of the (in)significance of the cultivation of foodstuffs among the Iroquois is symptomatic of his overall conceptions of "savagery" and, more generally, of "rude" peoples. Indeed, the entire *Essay* is structured around the opposition between "rude" and "civilized" societies, far more than on any careful developmental account of "progress". This opposition is characterized by the presence or absence of property and the division of labour. The preponderant influence of Adam Smith is evident in such a characterization. The division of labour, more than anything else, is the driving mechanism of progress, to the extent that specialists in any domain are the most inclined to seek technical progress, "improvements" in Ferguson's terms, in their particular field of activity. Savage societies, without property and with a minimal division of labour, have relatively little incentive to strive for material progress, a feature that Ferguson decidedly refuses to ascribe to any putative inferiority of savages as human beings.

The Iroquois are Ferguson's paradigmatic example of savage society. He bases his information on the first-hand accounts of French Jesuits, Lafitau and Charlevoix. Lafitau, in particular, had years of experience as a missionary to the Iroquois. In his reliance on the documented specifics of a particular case, Ferguson differed radically from most of his French predecessors, theorists of "natural" savages. Rousseau's depiction of humans in the state of Nature was deliberately speculative and imaginative, and his examples of savagery drawn sporadically, unmethodically and polemically from motley sources. Diderot's savages were more precisely located in Tahiti, but his Tahitians are drawn very loosely indeed from Bougainville's account. His Tahitians are for all intents and purposes primarily creatures of his polemical imagination. Ferguson's depiction of savagery is also, of course, polemical; how could it be otherwise? Nevertheless, his commitment to empirical evidence, largely drawn from one specific case, is if not unique at least quite remarkable. Such reliance on a particular case also has its drawbacks. Like many anthropologists in later centuries – Morgan among them – he was inclined to draw inordinate conclusions from a single case, however

accurately portrayed. Be this as it may, Ferguson drew his arguments from a real (at least as real as he could manage) rather than an imaginary case. His savages were a spur to, rather than a pure product of, his theoretical imagination.

He insists that his depiction of both the defects and the virtues of savages are drawn from the observations of qualified writers and not born of "conjecture":

"Who would, from mere conjecture, suppose, that the naked savage would be a coxcomb and a gamester: that he would be proud and vain, without distinction of title and fortune? and that his principal care would be to adorn his person, and to find an amusement Yet no one would be so bold as to affirm, that he would, likewise, in any instance, excel us in talents and virtues; that he would have a penetration, a force of imagination and elocution an ardour of mind, an affection and courage, which the arts, the discipline, and the policy of few nations would be able to improve" (1767, pp. 75-76).

For Ferguson, human capacities were invariant. The differences between savage and "civilized" societies were entirely social, and not in any way based on natural differences. His insistence on the savage fondness for gambling (for which he cites Tacitus on the Germans as well as his sources on the Iroquois) is arguably a rhetorical ploy to suggest that Ferguson is not idealizing savagery, that he is faithfully following his sources wherever they lead him.

However, Ferguson's aim is hardly to catalogue the virtues or for that matter the vices of savagery but rather to determine the ramifications of social life in the absence of property. Here, too, it is crucial to make critical distinctions. Just as the absence of "agriculture" did not imply that the Iroquois did not cultivate domesticated plants, so the absence of "property" did not preclude all forms of individual ownership. (How else, one might ask, could they gamble so passionately?) Men owned their weapons and their furs. (Ferguson, it must be noted, makes no mention whatsoever of the Iroquois role in the fur trade, an absolutely central feature of Iroquois social and political life in the eighteenth century, but whose acknowledgment would have wrought havoc on Ferguson's schema.) Women, on the other hand, owned the longhouses. Ferguson understood that the Iroquois were matrilineal and uxorilocal (obviously not his terms!), that husbands went to live with their wives and that women had a preponderant say in family and lineage matters. What mattered to Ferguson is that such ownership did not generate significant inequalities, that it did not lead to inheritable social distinctions. In this sense, property was a form, but not the only form, of ownership.

Ferguson used the description of Iroquois warfare as a means of illustrating the social implications of the absence of property and the division of labour. No doubt, Ferguson's personal experience as a regimental chaplain made him particularly attentive to military affairs. The absence of permanent inequalities among savages, he argued, generated a fierce egalitarian disposition: "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 ... Even when they follow a leader to the field, they cannot brook the pretensions to a formal command; they listen to no orders; and they come under no military engagements, but those of mutual fidelity, and equal ardour in the enterprise" (1767, pp. 83-84). (This characterization is so reminiscent of Evans-Pritchard's [1940] famous account

of the Nuer that it comes as no surprise that he was an admirer of Ferguson, to whom he devoted a long chapter in his unfinished history of anthropology [1981].) Individual warriors were never under compulsion to engage in campaigns. Rather, warfare, along with the hunt, was the domain where men could distinguish themselves. In addition, precisely because all warriors were equal, they enjoyed an equal stake in the affairs of the collectivity. Valour, however, was not an end in itself. On the contrary, victory was preferably achieved through stealth and ruse rather than through bravery. "The American rates his defeat from the numbers of men he has lost, or he estimates his victory from the prisoners he has made; not from his having remained the master of a field, or from his being driven from a ground on which he encountered his enemy" (1767, p. 133). A Pyrrhic victory was no victory at all. Self-sacrifice was definitely not a military virtue. This is not, of course, to suggest that there was no value placed on courage, but this was particularly reserved for the stoicism that prisoners were expected to display when faced with torture and death at the hands of their enemies.

While Ferguson did not dwell as centrally and systematically on the military in "civilized" societies, it served as a salient way to contrast the two kinds of society and the (unintended) consequences of the development of private property, social inequality, and the division of labor. The practice of civilized warfare is subject to the same effects of specialization combined with social inequality as the rest of society, as embodied by the difference between an officer and a private soldier:

"The general officer may be a great proficient in the knowledge of war, while the soldier is confined to a few motions of the hand and the foot. The former may have gained, what the latter has lost; and being occupied in the conduct of disciplined armies, may practise on a larger scale, all the arts of preservation, of deception, and of stratagem, which the savage exerts in leading a small party, or merely in defending himself" (1767, p. 175).

Ferguson did not add – perhaps because he found it so self-evident – that the life of the soldier is entirely expendable, unlike that of the Iroquois warrior.

The stultifying effects of the division of labour on the mass of workers was hardly lost on Ferguson. In a passage which earned him approval from Marx, he noted:

"Many mechanical arts, indeed, 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" (Ibid., p. 174).

The benefits of progress were very unequally distributed. "In every commercial state, notwithstanding any pretension to equal rights. The exaltation of a few must depress the many" (Ibid., p. 177).

The division of labour had other troubling political as well as military implications. Most concerning, not only to Ferguson but to many of his contemporaries, was the emergence of a specialized, professional army distinct from the civilian population. The idea that the military might seize the reins of power, either on its own or in the service of a wealthy party

that sought to purchase its services, was a standard bugaboo of late eighteenth-century British (and ultimately American) social theory. This was a preoccupation that Ferguson adopted from Montesquieu, whose central concern was to preclude the emergence of despotism, of unchecked central authority. Indeed, the final two sections of the *Essay*, fully a third of the entire work, were entitled “Of the Decline of Nations” and “Of Corruption and Political Slavery”. Clearly, for Ferguson, material progress did not inevitably entail political progress. Like Montesquieu, Ferguson sought to determine, if not how to conserve civic virtue (though he was arguably less cynical than Montesquieu in this respect) then how to compensate for its absence. The Iroquois functioned as Ferguson’s model of civic virtue much as the Roman Republic did for Montesquieu. For better or for worse, each contended that neither model was appropriate for contemporary Britain or France. For Montesquieu, the aristocratic cult of honour, despite its failings, was the only effective counterbalance in France to the development of overbearing monarchical centralization. For Ferguson, wealth rather than honour was the driving factor of social distinction, particularly as marked by the conspicuous ability to consume luxuries. Distinctions based on wealth rather than on birth were the ultimate hallmark of material progress. However, wealth, unlike honour, did not necessarily constitute a check on central authority, and worse, might easily serve to corrupt it.

More generally, the division of labour that propelled the development of material progress also rendered the cultivation of civic virtue all the more difficult:

“Nations of tradesmen come to consist of members who, beyond their own particular trade, are ignorant of all human affairs, and who may contribute to the preservation and enlargement of the commonwealth, without making its interest an object of their regard or attention” (1767, p. 173).

The specialization that underpins civilization radically restricts the scope of the knowledge and interests of all citizens, and not only of the masses of menial labourers. Individuals’ concerns with their particular interests, not to mention their ignorance of anything else, detract from their commitment to the general good of the nation, while inequalities of wealth give citizens a very unequal stake in what ought to be the common welfare. This said, Ferguson was hardly a cynic, and he did not despair entirely of the maintenance of civic virtue in civilized society, but he was intensely aware of the ways in which material progress constituted an obstacle, much less a means, of its cultivation in contemporary society.

To the extent that Ferguson’s elaborate construction of the contrast between “rude” and “civilized” societies serves as a critique of his own society, he follows in a long tradition of criticism that polemically uses the trope of “savagery” that goes back to Montaigne if not to Tacitus (though it should be emphasized that the very notion of “civilization” was itself a late eighteenth-century invention [Elias 2000]). What distinguishes Ferguson and constitutes his radical originality is the sociological terms in which this distinction is framed. He eschewed any dichotomy between “natural” savagery and “corrupted” civilization, a dichotomy that utterly failed to account for the human propensity for “corruption”. Ferguson’s savages were not only human but eminently social. It was the nature of their societies, themselves largely though not exclusively a feature of the nature of their economies, that determines the nature of their component individuals, and not the other way around. In this respect, his vision was

entirely reminiscent of those of the fourteenth-century Tunisian thinker, Ibn Khaldun, who contrasted desert lifeways to those of urban societies. These parallels between the ideas of Ibn Khaldun and Adam Ferguson were not lost on Ernest Gellner (1994), a great admirer of both thinkers.

Ferguson's lasting contribution to anthropological theory was his depiction of "savages" in general and the Iroquois in particular as fully social beings, whose very virtues and vices were (like our own) largely a function of their conditions of existence. On the other hand, he failed to understand the Iroquois as fully historical beings. Rather, they were subjects in a very different kind of history, a universal history of mankind where they constituted the first chapter: "It is in their present condition, that we are to behold, as in a mirrour, the features of our own progenitors" (1767, p. 80). Such universal history was enthusiastically pursued in nineteenth-century anthropology, most systematically by Morgan; his sociological analysis of "primitives" (as "savages" came to be called) was echoed most consistently in twentieth-century British social anthropology. But the Iroquois in Ferguson's day were not simply protagonists of universal history, or even exemplars of societies without developed notions of property. They were critical partners in the fur trade, important political and military allies or antagonists of France and Britain, the aspiring colonial powers in the region, actors in their own history, but also histories of the region and indeed of their eventual colonizers. In his denial of Iroquois coevalness, to use Fabian's (1983) language, as much as in his affirmation of their sociality, Ferguson was a harbinger of twentieth-century anthropological thought.

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