History and Theory in the Work of Adam Ferguson: A Reconsideration (1975)

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The report below was first circulated and summarized at a Seminar at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, Edinburgh University on **October 17, 1975**. It is a sequel to "History and Theory in the Scottish Enlightenment," *Journal of Modern History*, 48 (March, 1976), pp. 95-100, and it provides the background to "History and Theory in Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*: A Reconsideration," *Political Theory*, 5 (November, 1977), pp. 437-460 and "Ferguson's *Principles*: Constitution in Permanence," *Studies in Burke and His Time*, 19 (1978), pp. 208-222.

My reason for exhuming this old text is simply that it documents the fresh, early stages of an argument for an interpretation that challenges, among others, my own earlier *The Social and Political Thought of Adam Ferguson*, [Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 1965], but that I have never managed to make clear enough in my published writings to elicit a response of any kind from scholars in the field. My last efforts in this direction—both in the pages added to *Adam Ferguson: His Social and Political Thought*. [New Brunswick: Transaction, 2005] and in "Political Education for Empire and Revolution," Pp. 87-114 in Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle, eds., *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature* [London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008]—have been no more effective than the earlier writings.

The topic of "Adam Ferguson on Corruption and Decline" assigned to this panel cannot be properly addressed, in my judgment, unless the distinction between Ferguson's science of morals and his framing of prudential counsel is understood. "Corruption and decline" have no place in the one; they are highly probable and a constant threat in the other. The following report, reproduced verbatim from a mimeographed copy (with a few footnotes added) offers a rationale and sketch for such an approach.

Perhaps I should add a personal, somewhat apologetic note. I knew more in 1975 about Adam Ferguson and about the literature I consider important to understanding him than I do today, after many years devoted exclusively to twentieth-century subjects that are closely related to the earlier inquiries in theoretical interest but remote in scholarly coverage. I am nevertheless encouraged to contribute to this unique occasion, which assembles several of the outstanding more recent scholars in this field, by the evident continuing utility of my original book, written when the choice of such an exotic topic in itself confirmed the impression among my colleagues in political theory that I would never advance beyond my journeyman status.

Quite so.

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This memorandum reports on the questions that led to the project, the strategy of the investigation, and some results. The seminar presentation itself will concentrate on Parts IV and V of the report, but I shall welcome comments on the other materials as well, which are circulated in the hope of fostering collaboration with others working on directly related materials.

I. Origins

Two continuing controversies and some stimulating efforts to deal with the issues involved brought about this reconsideration of Ferguson's work. The first controversy concerns the main substantive teachings of the Scottish moral philosophers of the 18th Century, and the second, the philosophical structure of their work.

1. Scotch Philosophy or Scottish Historical School

Are we to take Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Smith, Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, and lesser figures like Kames and Ferguson as the founders of the Scotch moral philosophy, marked above all by the attempt to build a theory of moral judgment upon an empirical theory of human nature and involving a theory of knowledge grounded upon that psychology as metaphysical foundation? Or shall we deal with Kames, Smith, Ferguson, Millar and some others as members of a "Scottish Historical School," the major achievements of which must be seen as a comprehensive social theory, founded upon an interpretation of the historical process as having structure and immanent Meaning? Often drawing parallels between this "school" and Vico and/or Marx, this type of interpretation commonly but not always suggests that the philosophy of history it finds in the work is designed to supersede metaphysical speculations and to provide the frame of reference for treating all philosophical questions. For the former, contrasting interpretation, the Scots' "philosophical history" represents an application of their psychological philosophy, not the basis of their thought.

2. Philosophical/Social-theoretical System or Congeries of Inquiries or Ideology

Shall we treat the work of the "school," however defined, or of its various members as offering a single comprehensive system of thought, interrelating all of the topics taken up in Hume's *Treatise* or covered in the protean courses of moral philosophy? Or shall we take the Scottish inquiry of the 18th Century as making different sorts of contributions to diverse incipient disciplines, so that one can, for example, speak of Ferguson as anticipating empirical sociology without worrying about his moralizing, or Hume's theory of knowledge without regard to his political ideology, or Smith's political economy and his theory of morals as belonging to separate disciplinary contexts? Or shall we treat the texts primarily as belonging to cultural history, the contents and forms of which must be explained to the factors conditioning the culture as a whole, as must differences among them?

3. Immediate Stimuli to Reconsideration

When I worked on these materials years ago, several of these possibilities had not been as intelligently defined and explored as has now been done. Three works in particular made me dissatisfied with the solution that I had then contrived. Hans Medick has argued with great ingenuity that Smith must be understood as the "Newton" who laid the theoretical foundation for a comprehensive social philosophy based up on an historical anthropology anticipating in many important respects the work of Jürgen Habermas. George Davie's book on the Scottish academic tradition, in contrast, builds upon a subtle and fascinating understanding of the psychological and moral occupations of the Scots, relating the "philosophical" treatment of other issues to this central core. Since Medick moves from Puffendorff to Locke to Smith, while Davie looked back from the Nineteenth Century, there would be no necessary clash between the two interpretations, except upon the spongy ground of Dugald Stewart. But one would have to look again. (A decision strengthened by the rich new materials on cultural history that has also been developed in the intervening period.)

The third work that provoked my return to these materials was itself much more modest in scope and has not yet been published, although it builds on an important book. In Spring 1974, Robert D. Cumming criticized a paper by Ronald Meek, in which Meek had laid out his influential view of Adam Smith as author of a socio-historical theory, marked above all by the notion of four stages of social development and an explanation of each of these stages through a theory according to which the productive activities of a society form the sub-structure which determines as superstructure the institutional framework. Drawing in part on some chapters in his *Human Nature and History*, as well as on a comparison between Smith's approach and the historical writings of Hume, Robertson, and Millar, Cumming persuaded me, first, that the social theory in Smith's *Moral Sentiments* differs profoundly from the theory of the political economy; second, that the four-stage interpretation is not theoretical and not basic to either; and third, that the account of the four stages has a good deal in common with Voltaire's history of *moeurs et usages*, and that there is no theoretical relationship between sub-and super-structure to be found in the design. In his book, moreover, Cumming offers an explanation grounded upon difficulties internal to the theory for Smith's abandonment of the earlier attempts to integrate all his topics within one comprehensive theory, and for his subsequent creation of distinct moral and political-economical inquiries

Medick had taken a line of argument, which I had also earlier found tempting, to a conclusion that rendered the whole direction suspect to me; Davie had emphasized the fertility of the philosophical activities the traces of which in Ferguson's writings I had tended to slight; and Cumming had offered an interpretation which, if it also applied to Ferguson (as he by no means claims as yet) blows my earlier account of the material clear to hell.

II. Strategic Decisions

1. Differences within the "School"

Although Dugald Stewart had already treated the Scottish moral philosophers as a group, with only Hume put to one side as gadfly and skeptic, I decided to follow up the evidence of fundamental differences not only between Reid and Hume but also between Reid and Smith, Smith and Ferguson, and so on. Since Ferguson assailed Smith's fundamental ideas about theory, as he understood them, as well as his specific theory of sympathy, it seems unlikely that they would think alike about relations between history and theory. The decision to question the cohesiveness of the school and to stop looking for "representative men" to speak for the whole was reinforced by Nicholas Phillipson's current work on James Beatty and the intellectual mobilization against skepticism.

2. Diverse conceptions of "history" and contrasting uses of "historical" materials in theory

Some of the discussion in the current literature is marred by a vague conception of "historical consciousness," so that any and all signs of interest in history in any sense can be taken as support for whatever thesis about philosophy of history is put forward. Such work may have great merit in assembling valuable materials, but as an analysis it won't do. We can stipulate that books on history were popular in 18th-century Britain, especially if they were as pleasing as those of Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon. We can also stipulate a widespread conviction among contemporaries that they were indeed contemporaries, living together in a distinctive age, which was "modern" not only in contrast to the "ancients" of classical antiquity, but also in contrast to the "ancients" of the feudal past. Those are journalistic commonplaces by 1750, I think, if not much earlier. As Pocock has shown, the investigation of such "commonplace' is itself an exciting activity; but the contributions of the Scottish Enlightenment to its formation cannot have been very important. Boswell records Dr. Johnson and Lord Monboddo discovering their shared enthusiasm for histories of manners and morals: if this was a genuine meeting of minds, it an hardly have been about philosophy of history. The question to be asked is how these opinions were taken up into moral and political theory, and to do this we have to proceed with as clear an understanding as we can muster of what structural features distinguished theoretical activity from opinion-mongering.

a. In his *Dissertation*, Dugald Stewart speaks of the distinctive Scottish combination of jurisprudence, philosophy, and history; and this passage is often cited to support the claim that there was a new "synthesis" in these writings. But Stewart says quite clearly that outstanding writers combined a philosophical appreciation for universal jurisprudential <u>principles</u> with an historical appreciation for the diversity of circumstances at different times and in different places. Stewart contrasts their work with those who think the historical inquiry is everything as well as with Grotius and his school, who appear to Stewart to propose some sort of universal <u>code</u> of law indifferent to differing circumstances. What Stewart ascribes to the Scots is a very different matter from "historical jurisprudence" in the continental sense and from claiming to derive the

philosophically-determined historical tasks of an epoch, or any of the other sorts of things that might plausibly be called historicist. Stewart also likens the Scots' use of history to undermine the credibility of prejudices to Bentham's proceedings against stale fictions; and Bentham's has not been usually considered a historical theory. All of this is not noted here to resolve the question but to illuminate my strategic decision.

b. R.D. Cumming, in the book cited earlier, has argued that the Humanist tradition has been marked since Cicero by an inner tension between political philosophy grounded on a theory of human nature and political philosophy grounded on some "historicist" situational imperatives, as in Polybius and Machiavelli; and that later writers who locate themselves in that tradition can best be understood by considering how they define themselves in relation to this ambiguity. Having been made better aware of the ancient interplay between these two themes, we will be less struck by signs of one or the other, and more attentive to the nuanced way in which a given philosopher strikes a balance within his theory.

3. Differences about specialized disciplines

As noted earlier, there is some indication that authors differed on questions relating to disciplinary specialization: how were the different sciences to be related to one another? How are lines of separation to be drawn? How much reflection is there on the various decisions made? The questions arose in pedagogical as well as philosophical contexts, in the first generations after the regenting system was abandoned; and Walter J. Ong, among others, has alerted us to the possibility that considerations of pedagogical "method" may interact with questions of "method" in philosophy.

4. Against entrapment by the categories of intellectual history

Despite attempts to draw distinctions, there is a constant tendency toward reifying terms like "Enlightenment" and toward imagining that one can infer from it what a given writer may or may not have been thinking about. But there is no necessary uniform cultural development, even within as close-knit a cultural community as Western Europe (or Edinburgh), even where the writers visibly "influence" one another. I think that Edinburgh in the 18th Century resembles Budapest in the first decades of the present century I that its "enlightenment" was sparked, or at least marked, by the <u>simultaneous reception</u> of diverse materials derived from different intellectual "generations," as some historians chronicle these things, and that they worked upon these diverse materials—or let them work upon themselves—without a strong sense of anachronism.[1] The historizing of an intellectual tradition was a contribution of some Scottish writers; but it

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[1] The curious reference to Budapest is an allusion to my study of Karl Mannheim's intellectual origins, which I had recently re-published in English translation: "Culture and Revolution: Lukács in the Hungarian Revolutions of 1918/19." <u>Telos</u>, No. 10, Winter 1971, pp. 35-92. The concept of „simultaneous reception“ derives from a technical term in art history adapted by Mannheim in his well-known article on „The Problem of Generations.“

was not a presupposition for their work. That is, Smith, Stewart, and others undertook to order the received intellectual materials into a developmental sequence, and we can study these proposals for the emerging place of concepts like anachronism in their work; but we cannot impose on them a set of assumptions that we derive from the 19th-century periodizations that define so much of our intellectual history. To illustrate "simultaneous reception," it is only necessary to think of Pringle reading to his class from Cicero and Bacon, while McLaurin presents Newton. I am not a good enough historical scholar to say how many important works of the 16t and 17th Centuries appeared new and relevant to the first generation after the Union and especially after the rise of Moderate influence in the cultural institutions; but I think that there is ample reason for caution about jumping to conclusions from the early reception of Newton or the mutual admiration between Hume and the French *philosophes.* Just as these happenings peacefully (mostly) coexist with "old-fashioned" uses of religion, they would also peacefully coexist with "old-fashioned" uses of the classics.

5. Attention to the interplay between rhetorical and logical principles in structuring philosophies

As noted, the work of Walter J. Ong has alerted me to the ways in which Ramist method, for example, commingled rhetorical principles of effective presentation with logical criteria of judgment. Bacon had inveighed against this as an abuse, in some contexts at least, but there is no reason to suppose that the issues are sorted out, especially if it is correct to speak of simultaneous reception. [Smith is reported to have put aside, during his short term as Professor of Logic, the logic textbooks of his predecessors in favor of what he and his students considered to be the far more useful materials in his lectures on rhetoric and *belles lettres*.* [* The prize essays for Stevenson's logic classes collected at the EUL indicate that here too the students were inspired to prepare rhetorical exercises rather than to work out logical problems of the sorts posed by technical textbooks in the field.] This puts one in mind of Erasmus and More rather than Newton and Locke; and the celebrated names I invoke indicate that I do not mean thereby to dismiss the philosophical claims of such proceedings out of hand (see Martin Fleischer's excellent short book on Thomas More).

6. Philosophical structures not to be characterized simply by the moral or political maxims they endorse

In all interpretation, there must be an overwhelming presumption in favor of the coherence and integrity of the text. The interpreter ought to assume that there is a central structural principle in the work before him; and that the maxims or opinions one can, so to speak, skim off the top are not by any means the most interesting or important thing about it, and can themselves hardly be understood except by reference to the context within which the author meant to place them. The term "rhetoric" was not introduced into the discussion to denigrate the structuring principles we may find, but to help us to distinguish them. (How is it possible, for example, to discuss the place of "history" in the theory/ies of Adam Smith without paying the closest possible attention to what we know about his views on history, as transmitted in the notes we have of his rhetoric lectures?)

Maxims and opinions are important to these writers, as are the contests among them about the key concepts that appear in the maxims. But the maxims themselves tell us little. Consider how little we know when we know that Hutcheson, Hume, Smith and Ferguson could all claim with good right to endorse the ethical maxims in Cicero's *De Officiis* or the political doctrines of the Whig establishment.

7. A Note on the "Sociology of Knowledge"

The study proposed undertakes a structural analysis of a body of thought or sequence of texts. The questions about their interpretability by reference to social activities other than those they document directly (i.e., their being written and published in some form) are held to one side. I now think that such a separation is necessary in any case. When I have completed a structural analysis of sociology of knowledge that I also now have under way, I may want to return to these questions in connection with the Scots. (A recent product of this work appears in the current issue of *Cultural Hermeneutics*)

III. The Design

The study was originally planned, as must be clear from what was said about the origins and strategy, as a comparison covering at least Ferguson and Smith. Given my inclination to believe that Cumming is right about Smith as well as the intellectual antagonism between the two, this struck me as valuable testing ground for an array of questions about the diversity within the intellectual generation and about the complex variety of their views of theory and history. Furthermore, an important theoretical difference within the group patronized by Lord Milton and active in the Moderate party in the church, as well as in the cultural institutions they established, would call into question some interpretations that account for differences among Scots of the Enlightenment as functions of generational differences, conflicting socio-political commitments, or regional contrasts. Unhappily there can be no perfect critical experiments in this sort of investigation. Both Smith and Ferguson are outsiders in important respects: Smith, the genius with a cosmopolitan audience and an Oxford education, whose main contacts with the Edinburgh circle were with his genuine peer, David Hue, and who was well-known to keep his peace during the cheerful conversations at the Poker Club; Ferguson, very much the local literary-political man and pedagogue, down from the Highlands, intimately involved as trusted agent in details of political machinations. But these differences do not discount the importance of a comparison: if we can show a harmony between the distinctive thoughts of each and the ways each ordered his life, we cannot infer from such "correlation" what causal connections may obtain. From an historical point of view, we simply have to do with two complex entities to be comprehended as best we can. The assessment of historical explanations is, in any case, a subsidiary interest of the study, important primarily as a defense against premature formulations whose claims would obviate the need for detailed inquiry. Our major interest is in looking at two figures who are both always included among the representative thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment—whether construed as Scotch philosophy or as the Scottish Historical School.

But this design has been disrupted and its implementation at least delayed by the discovery of important discontinuities in Ferguson's thought, forcing me to limit my present effort to a detailed examination of Ferguson on theory and history. I hope that the larger project will nevertheless be attempted, perhaps as a collaborative venture, including contributions on Hume, Kames, Millar, Robertson, Reid, Stewart, and some others, if a group could agree on a comparative strategy. That the heritage of the Scottish Enlightenment was ambiguous can be recognized quite vividly simply by imagining a conversation between two of its noted 19th-century admirers, Sir William Hamilton and Karl Marx. If the reinterpretation of traditions is an important part of the way in which we refine and carry forward our own thinking, as I believe it is, investigations of this sort have an importance beyond their antiquarian interest. But I don't want to quarrel about this now, and will settle for clean antiquarian work, if I can produce it.

IV. The Evidence of Ferguson's Lecture Notes

Although Ferguson was reputed to have delivered his lectures extemporaneously until after his illness late in 1780, the manuscript volumes of his lecture notes in the Edinburgh University Library contains extensive preparations for the topics in his *Institutes* for the academic years after 1775, except for the years he was on leave. Every topic is covered in these notes at least once, and some as often as four or five times, in different versions for different years. It is quite possible that Ferguson lectured without such notes earlier but decided to change his procedure when he came back after spending a year abroad in 1774-5. In any case, Ferguson's credentials as spontaneous lecturer are not at issue here.

The notes are interesting in many respects, not least because they help to identify the matters about which Ferguson remained unsettled in his mind at this late point in his career as well as the alternatives he weighed, and, on a different level, because they bear witness to this professor's impressive dedication, painstakingly writing and rewriting lectures based on his own familiar texts during the period between his fifty-second and sixty-second years of age. In the present context, however, the lectures are important above all because they emphasize and amplify three points already suggested by the *Institutes of Moral Philosophy.*

> 1. THE CONTRAST TO THE *ESSAY ON THE HISTORY OF CIVIL SOCIETY* ON THE ISSUES THAT HAVE BEEN MORE RECENTLY DESIGNATED BY THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN "METHODOLOGICAL COLLECTIVISM" AND "METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM."

In the *Essay*, Ferguson writes:

> Mankind are to be taken in groupes, as they have always subsisted. The history of the individual is but a detail of the sentiments and thoughts he has entertained in the view of his species: and every experiment relative to this subject should be made with entire societies, not with single men. (4)

In his lecture notes, however, we find the following:

> Of the facts which are contained in the History of Man's Nature, some occur upon view of the species or present themselves to the Spectator of human affairs.
> Others occur to every person as he attends to the operations of nature in himself.
> I have chosen to state such facts apart and under separate titles.
> The first I have termed the History of the Species.
> The second is the history of the Individual,
> Facts of the second denomination are the most familiar and ascertained by the surest evidence.
> But the habit of placing our attention on external objects, makes it more easy for us to collect facts relating to any external subject than facts more contiguous relating to ourselves.
>
> The history of the species being distinguished from that of the individual we begin with the easiest.
>
> The species indeed exhibits the fruits and affects of faculties dispositions and powers of which every individual is conscious in himself. And if the effect and exterior shall have fixed our attention, we can possibly return from thence with a disposition to examine the causes and internal structure of what is interesting in the effect and external appearance. (EUL Lectures I, ff. 102-102b, L.8, November 24th, 1783; see also ff. 105-106, L. 8, November 21, ??)

In the later formulation, then, the "history of the species" serves above all as propaedeutic to the "history of the individual"; and it is from the latter only that explanatory principles, theories, and laws of nature can be derived. The contrast between the two assessments of the "history of the individual" can be accounted for in part by the obvious and acknowledged influence of Reid. More pressing at this point in the presentation, however, is Ferguson's general difficulty in reconciling the Baconian conception of induction, which he has been expounding in these lectures, with any "history" other than the synchronic "natural or descriptive history," notwithstanding his remark that "human affairs" are matter for "civil or narrative history," which seems to imply a diachronic account. I can't pursue this here, but merely note it in oprder to indicate that the passage quoted signals a fundamental difficulty about the relationships Ferguson considers possible between the history of human actions, conjectural or otherwise, and a scientific theory of man. (On the questions about descriptive and narrative history, see EUL Lectures I, ff. 49-50, L. 3, November 14, 1776.) [2] In the preface to the *Principles of Moral and Political Science*, then, Ferguson announces that

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[2] Compare my recent treatment of the relationship between the two aspects of Ferguson's Lectures in "Political Education for Empire and Revolution," Pp. 87-114 in Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle, eds., *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature.* London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008. For development of the comparison with Bacon, see below.

he has again revised his treatment of the "history of the species," and, in fact, we find a fresh attempt to master these difficulties.

2. THE CONTRAST TO THE ESSAY ON THE ISSUES THAT HAVE BEEN MORE RECENTLY FORMULATES AS A CONTRAST BETWEEN DESCRIPTIVE AND EVALUATIVE STATEMENTS, OR BETWEEN EMPIRICAL AND NORMATIVE THEORY.

The Lectures underline the importance that Ferguson attaches to the contrast between a natural science of mind and moral philosophy. Both build upon a common basis of fact, he maintains, but they perform different sorts of operations upon these materials and issue in altogether different kind of conclusions. Although the conclusions can in both cases be designated as laws or principles, the terms have distinctive meanings in each. In the physical science of mind, according to Ferguson, the laws comprehend the variety of phenomena in general terms that are true to the facts and can, as theory, enter into science. Science, in turn, reveals its reality by enhancing man's power over its subjects. In moral philosophy, in contrast, laws build upon facts as "superstructure" upon a "foundation," aim at producing a perfect condition in the nature about which the facts impart information, address the will rather than the understanding, and are valid by being obligatory. There can be no "theory" in moral philosophy and the term "science" does not apply. Facts about moral conduct must never be allowed to dictate moral laws. In the *Essay*, the moral commentary is simply interspersed among the "historical" depictions, with nothing to dispel the impression that it simply reveals an aspect of the natural facts being presented, as when Ferguson, for example, opens his second chapter on "Happiness" by remarking, "Whoever has compared the different conditions and manners of men, under varieties of education and fortune, will be satisfied, that mere situation does not constitute their happiness or misery." (48) Although in both works moral judgments prove on closer inspection to rest on some sort of teleological argument, when they are argued at all, there are important differences between the "ruminative" harvest of such judgments while moving through historical materials and the construction of a distinct phase of inquiry to generate laws of excellence. And the differences bear directly on the questions about the ways in which history and theory interrelate in Ferguson's work, especially if we are asked to place him in relationship to what is later called "historicism." In this respect as well, the *Principles* attempt a different course.

3. THE CONTRAST TO THE *ESSAY* ON THE FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE PERTINENT TO HUMAN ACTION

While the *Essay* constantly emphasizes the claim that performance depends on mastery of detail, on the ability to respond to complex "circumstances" and "situations" constituted by diverse factors, an ability that theory can do but little to enhance and that theoretical habits of mind often cripple, the *Institutes* and especially the Lectures mostly stress methodical knowledge culminating in science and general moral principles which can then be applied to the various arts of life. The contrasting forms of presentation, as essay and as methodical exposition of a discipline, harmonize with the judgments expressed about the forms of useful knowledge. As indicated by the title, *The Principles*

of Moral and political Science treat this issue in a different way again. Since most of the thought which has been variously designated as historicist has concern for the relationships between theory and practice, the significance of these contrasts for our main question is also clear.

CONCLUSION

The obvious conclusion from these contrasts is that the major works of Adam Ferguson have to be treated separately and comparatively to ascertain his thought on the relations between theory and history. We cannot even prejudge the question whether we are dealing with a "development," since Ferguson kept both of the other works in print, revising the *Institutes* as late as 1805 and the *Essay* as late as 1814. Of course, motives of gain and vanity may suffice to explain this, but, in keeping with a presumption in favor of the author, it is necessary to keep open the possibility that the three approaches form part of one structure. In considering this structure, it is also essential to treat Ferguson's *History* and his other writings. This is not to suggest another book on Ferguson, but the need for a series of studies that will probably be reducible, in the end, to a chapter.

V. Findings on the *History of Civil Society.* (Outline of Study I)

I now want to summarize three points which emerge from a review of the text informed by the comparison with the *Institutes* and Lectures on the points noted above. (This rests on the ms. in progress.)

1. The reliance on a "surface reading" of Bacon[3]

Although the name of Francis Bacon nowhere appears in the *Essay*, the treatment of "natural history," "the history of arts," the "history of literature" and much else indicate that the work was prepared with constant attention to Bacon's treatment of "history" in the *Advancement of Learning* and (especially) *De Augmentis Scientiarum*. These inferences from the text are strengthened by external evidence taken from the nearly contemporary *Institutes* and lectures, as well as our information about his education and that of his friends. Several commentators on Bacon have called attention to the principles he laid down programmatically for the investigation of human affairs and the actual treatment of moral and civil knowledge in books VII and VIII of *De Augmentis*. Putting it briefly, one can say that the program hopes to subject these inquiries to the logic of investigation put forward in the *Novum Organum*, but that the discussions themselves exemplify the dialectical modes of presentation perfected by Bacon's great Humanist contemporaries. I believe that it was precisely this feature of the work that rendered it so attractive to the proponents of traditional Humanism in the Scottish Enlightenment, Pringle and Reid, as well as Ferguson. In any case, the point I think I can support now is that Ferguson draws on a "surface reading" of these texts of Bacon to find his model for celebrating the scientific revolution in understanding physical nature, while renewing humanist commentary on moral and political matters, drawing

[3] The concept of "surface reading" is taken from Georg Simmel's sociological writings and refers to the abstention from a search for unifying "deep structures" or foundational principles.

heavily on Cicero but also carrying forward the ambiguity within the tradition about the importance to be assigned human nature or history.

a. This involves, first of all, taking advantage of the ambiguity in the concept "history." On the one hand, history designates the arrangement of facts from which inductive scientific inquiry derives its principles and explanations. On the other hand, the term also refers to the accounts of human action that were traditionally said to be the sources of wisdom for statesmen and practical men of business. Bacon himself, on the "surface," at least, conflates the two senses; as can be seen, for example, in his discussion of "negotiation" under civil knowledge, and in his other references to Machiavelli in the section on "ruminative history." Ferguson exploits these possibilities to allow him to claim that he is more "scientific" than Hobbes or Rousseau or Mandeville, and, implicitly, Hume and Smith as well, because he begins with natural history rather than building on theories or hypotheses about causes; while he is also claiming to offer materials more immediately useful to men of affairs, because encounter with history broadens practical experience and enhances practical wisdom in away no abstract knowledge, however rigorous or valid, will do. This second sense of history also obviates most of the questions about the way to build theory upon narrative or civil history, or even upon the history of a "species" that "advances" from rudeness to civilization" and is not, as Bacon has said, an assemblage of individuals identical in essential respects. In brief, Ferguson conflates the scientific and humanist associations of the term history, and this renders the question of scientific theory largely beside the point of this work. The important exception to be discussed is the theory of constitutions derived from Montesquieu. But "theory" in this case is taken as a model for arranging diverse materials as an aid to the interpretation of circumstances so as to reveal possibilities for action, and not as uncovering the hidden springs of nature so that they can be controlled. The contrast between "circumstances" and "character" which is decisive for Bacon's conception of civil history remains decisive, as it does, of course, in Ferguson's *History* and in Robertson's work.

b. The equation between knowledge and power, in short, holds both ways, as the statement of identity would logically require on its face. Not only is anything put forward as knowledge to be tested by its effectiveness in strengthening man's power over nature, but also anything in the mind that enhances man's ability "to perform" is to be taken as knowledge, whether it is reduced to a science or not. The ability to perform, moreover, maybe quite a different matter in moral and civil situations than the mastery envisioned in the mechanical arts.

2. The Essay Form as "Literary Transaction."

The dialectical or simply literary play upon the word "history" is legitimate in an essay as it is not in a methodical treatise. This is why the methodological difficulties about the relationship between theory and history first show up in the *Institutes* and lectures. Ferguson's use of the essay must be linked to his understanding of the class of literary works that also includes orations, dialogues, and the like. In one of his lectures, he termed this class "literary transactions," and distinguished it from history, science, and

poetry. The writings of Cicero and Demosthenes, for example, “contain statements, representations, arguments, and persuasions whether addressed to the understanding or the will. The merit of them consists in understanding well the subject that is in question and in use of proper means to obtain the end of the speaker…. The whole is but a kind of transaction that results from the genius of a society that is happily occupied and disposed.” (EUL Lectures I, f. 351, L 33, January 16th, 1784.) Ferguson meant his *Essay* to achieve what Bacon had claimed for his own, to “come home to men’s business and bosom.” (*Epistle Dedicatory* to Bacon’s *Essays*)

Hume had already written of the essay as a bridge between the “learned” and the “conversible”; but Ferguson sees the relationship between these as more a matter of joint political deliberations constituting the civility of society, which for him is primarily a political matter, than does Hume, who is rather thinking of polite and civilizing conversation. For Ferguson to write an essay upon history, in short, is to perform an act comparable to orating in a public forum, with the radical change in form required by the radical change in circumstances (compare Shaftesbury). (To know how Ferguson felt about the change we have only to consider his lecture on human communications, where Ferguson argues that the toga is the “natural” garment for man, because only in such garb is it possible to reveal the expressive movements of the body essential to effective communication in a public place.) Developing a “method” for a course of study is quite a different thing, and the “principles” of a science set still different requirements.

3. Civilized Society as a Scene for Action: The Problem of Place

(Because some of the source materials are exceptionally interesting, I want to offer an extract from the longer work at this point, instead of a summary.)

“And so, if we may call [orderly conduct] also moderation, it is defined by the Stoics as follows: ‘Moderation is the science of disposing aright everything that is done or said.’ So the essence of orderliness and of right-placing, it seems, will be the same; for orderliness they define also as ‘the arrangement of things in their suitable and appropriate places.’ By ‘place of action,’ moreover, they mean seasonableness of circumstances.”

Cicero, *De Officiis* 1.40.142

I want to suggest that Ferguson’s intellectual project in the *Essay* is above all a topological one. The aim is to order the rich variety of materials according to places. There is a complex literature dealing with the interplay between the organizing principles of rhetorical dialectic and the logic of judgment and explanation; but I am not qualified to do more than to suggest a possible connection between the ways Ferguson treats history in the *Essay* and the Ramist dialectic, which apparently held its place in Scottish universities longer than elsewhere. And such continuing influence within the academic tradition may be consistent with the admiration for Bacon and the pioneering acceptance of Newton, if I am right about the simultaneous reception of diverse influences and about Ferguson’s surface reading of texts. Leaving these historical conjectures aside, I want first of all to call attention to the evidence in the *Institutes* and lectures that Ferguson saw rational operation as primarily a matter of arrangement, and arrangement, in turn, as

primarily a matter of ordering materials according to topics or places. But my recourse to the language of place is not intended merely to indicate some possible structural features of the work.

Ferguson's topological strategy arises quite plausibly out of the activity he has undertaken, which is neither inquiry nor representation, in Bacon's sense, but rather the constitution of a place in which men could act as well as talk, the creation of a scene within which actors could perform, or the relocation of men who feared they might be homeless. There is metaphor in this account, but no mysticism: 160 years later, John Dewey was to speak of creating a public and mean something very similar by it. Plato and Machiavelli had already made it a vital part of the education of rulers to let them know the terrain upon which their actions would have to take place. For Ferguson, however, the task of examining the places where action would take place is much more difficult and urgent.

Instead of rehearsing familiar considerations, let me simply pair some place names to remind us of some problems: New Town and Old Town; Lowlands and Highlands; Edinburgh and London; London and Paris; Britain and Rome; Edinburgh and Athens; Britain and Europe; Scotland and England. It may also be useful to recall, in this shorthand fashion, Ferguson's manifest delight in the travel literature of his time; his association with James Hutton and others engaged in studies of the surface of the earth; the Moderate sponsorship of Sinclair's Statistical Survey. Much has been said about the supposed rise of "historical consciousness" in the Scotland of that age. I would suggest that this sense of the importance of time is closely linked and often subordinated to the sense of displacement and boundaries destroyed.

These allusions may help to link our discussion to the researches of cultural historians, but they cannot by themselves control the interpretation of Ferguson's work. In any case, as we shall see, Ferguson means to transmute the geographical and physical sense of place into something more complex. As with much else of Ferguson's work, it isn't hard with regard to this to identify what can be easily seen as "source" for his "ideas." Hume had first published his *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* in 1741, and a major theme in several, especially the one on "national character," was an argument against Montesquieu's stress on "physical" as against "moral" causes. But though this material doubtless taught Ferguson much, a comparison between the uses they made of it would have to begin with Hume's conception "that politics may be reduced to a science" and Ferguson's endeavor to have political actors do great deeds. Hume can take distance from the question, "whether the British government inclines more to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic," as witness the detached conclusion that "absolute monarchy…is the easiest death" of the constitution. This must then be contrasted with Ferguson's fierce discussion of "corruption and political slavery," at the end of the *Essay*. This is not the occasion for expanding the comparison, but it will not suffice, I think, to refer the differences to anything as simple as contrasting political ideologies or anything as reassuring as contrasting temperaments.

That knowledge serves above all to allow a person to place himself and that placement is essential if a man is to judge and to act well are Ferguson's most profound convictions. They pervade the *Essay* and determine its form as well as its content. Nor do I think it a mere pun to remark the double meaning of the term "place" in the polital language of the time, or a slur on him to call attention to Ferguson's vigorous exertions in this regard as well. Ferguson doubted whether those who occupied places could properly command them unless they could also see the features of the terrain upon which they were to move. And here the interplay between the learned and the conversible, in literary and political transactions, was to create a new situation. It is remarkable how early Ferguson formed these conceptions. Before returning to the *Essay*, I want to discuss some writings by Ferguson from the year 1745,

The first is a friendly letter to his brother, John, written upon Adam's arrival in military camp in the Netherlands, where the young divinity student had been settled as chaplain of the Highlands regiment commanded by the nineteen-year-old son of his patroness. Ferguson opens the letter with a casual comment that announces a theme. "Were you in your old place," he writes, "and I at my old corner of the table, I could tell you a great many storys and adventures…" As he continues, we see that the obstacle to telling are not merely the inconvenience of writing. "I promised to write you from London, but … I was so bewildered and lost in that great place and my brain so jumbled that I could not think of doing anything orderly." And what was it about that "great place" that disoriented him so? What were the bewildering experiences?

> During the short time I was there I got into a great variety of mixed company which afforded a deal of entertainment to which before I had been pretty much a stranger; every fellow reads the public papers and talks his mind concerning them with all the vehemence imaginable.

He then goes on to illustrate some of the startling things he heard said, astonishing because they were opinions about international politics and suggestions for the King and his ministers. Then follows an explanation, presumably formulated after the bewildering events, as he is writing the letter from the sanctuary of the army camp, where he and the others know their places:

> You see these vast oddities of character, as might naturally be expected, in a place where a great many of the inhabitants come from different corners of the world, and bring their own peculiarities with them, and where the characters of others are shaped amidst a multitude, as chance or their different occupations would have it.

How can he know all this, he imagines his brother asking, havin spent only two weeks there? Ferguson describes the opportunities for observing, themselves part of the bewildering experience:

> You or I may go into an Eating house… sit at what board, join what company you will, and talk familiarly with people who neither know you or one another, and whom perhaps you will never have another sight of.

It is the people and the way they talk that make the place, or rather, deprive it of the qualities that a place must have, if Ferguson is to be able to find himself in it. The contrast between this conversation and the conversation that Ferguson and his contemporaries so much treasured amounts to parody. Ferguson barely saw the physical side of the city. There is only the dull remark: "I have seen St. Paul's which to my shallow judgment is a grand building." When he comes to talk about Antwerp later in the letter, he does remark on a grand spire and a mural by Rubens in Notre Dame. Perhaps he couldn't talk to anyone there. He opens his report on the Lowlands with a description of Dutch character: "They are the greediest for money of any people I ever saw, profit is their life and joy." Their temper is as flat as their land, he says. And then he tells a lively story about one of his travel companions being dragged out of the *petit maison* in mid-passage, because the landlord of the inn thought he was trying to dodge the bill. He infers from the condition of the *boers'* houses, none of which appeared to him much better or worse than a manse, that conditions among them were pretty nearly equal. And he quotes without much respect the remark of a gentleman in his party that there wasn't a gentleman native to the whole country. The letter closes with a perfunctory mention of his first sermon and an enthusiastic account of his first military review, where he'd passed the troop in the retinue of the commanding officer. (NLS Ms. 903, f. 25)

This requires no additional comment and we pass to a consideration of the sermon Ferguson preached to the First Highland Regiment of Foot on the occasion of a Fast appointed on December 18th, 1745, to solemnize the determination to resist the Jacobite rebels. According to the title-page of the pamphlet, the text is Ferguson's own translation from the Gaelic he had employed with his Highlands congregation. The sermon is preached on 2 Samuel X.12: "Be of good courage, and let us play the Men for our People, and for the Cities of God." Most of the talk instructs his hearers in Whig political doctrine, contrasting the "civil liberties" to be found under the existing "happy establishment" with the tyrannical aspirations of men who doom other men "by birth, the property of a man" and are beholden to France and to Rome:

> Are not our laws duly executed, and our Persons and Properties secured? The happy effects of which Administration we behold in the Peace and Independence, which prevails in every part of our Country.

Ferguson also reminds them of the special obligations of soldiers and the general obligation, when there is a emergency, of all men under laws to defend their country; and he pictures the safeguarding of the "religious interests" by the existing regime. It is the opening and closing commentaries on the biblical text, however, that attract our attention to the pamphlet,

Ferguson writes:

> In the first place: By a man's country is meant that Society or united Body of Men, of which he is a Member, sharing all the Advantages that arise from such a Union. Not merely the Soil or Spot on which he was born, as is too often understood by many. On this Supposition, the Love of one's Country, which has

> always been esteem'd the most manly virtue might be rejected as a mere Whim or Prejudice. No: the Name of Country bears a meaning more sacred and interesting. It is not for the Place of their Nativity, that Jaob* exhorts the Israelites to play the Men: It was for their People and for the Cities of their God. (*The printed text actually has the misprint "Jacob," which is either a Freudian slip or a neat bit of sabotage by a Jacobite printer.)

Ferguson goes on to insist that it is "society under the regulation of Laws and Government," which is "the state for which Providence has calculated our natures." As he comes to this conclusion, he calls out, "The Disturbers of [the country's] Peace are now advanced into the very heart of the Kingdom and would direct their course towards the Metropolis." It is curious enough to hear him employing these metaphors about the city which had confused him so. But his immediate task is stranger yet and reveals the weakness of the intellectual resources he has at his disposal as yet,[4] Speaking to Highlanders in Gaelic, it must be recalled, he now feels compelled to say:

> If you oppose your own acquaintances, it is to prevent their ruin: If you oppose your own relations, it is to save them and their posterity from Slavery forever.

As a grown man, Ferguson shares a widespread awareness that the government, manners, and opulence of his age distinguish it from the classical cities of antiquity as from the ancient times of feudal barbarism. He takes it as his special task to show that modern polished and commercial society—with its bewildering great places, its varieties of mixed companies, its demands that persons oppose their acquaintances and relations, its view of the love of the place of one's nativity as a mere whim and prejudice, its flatness of temperament and greediness for money—that it can nevertheless be understood as a people and a city, in the sense of the old patriotism, that it provides occasion, as the Bible text says, to be of good courage and play the men. Or at the least that it can be understood as a place where one can think of doing something orderly. That is the project of the *Essay*.

[4] The puzzle posed by the differences between the first and second contrasts between places of order and disorder is solved more effectively in the published article that emerged from this research: "History and Theory in Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*: A Reconsideration," *Political Theory,* 5 (November, 1977), pp. 437-460 at 440-444.