

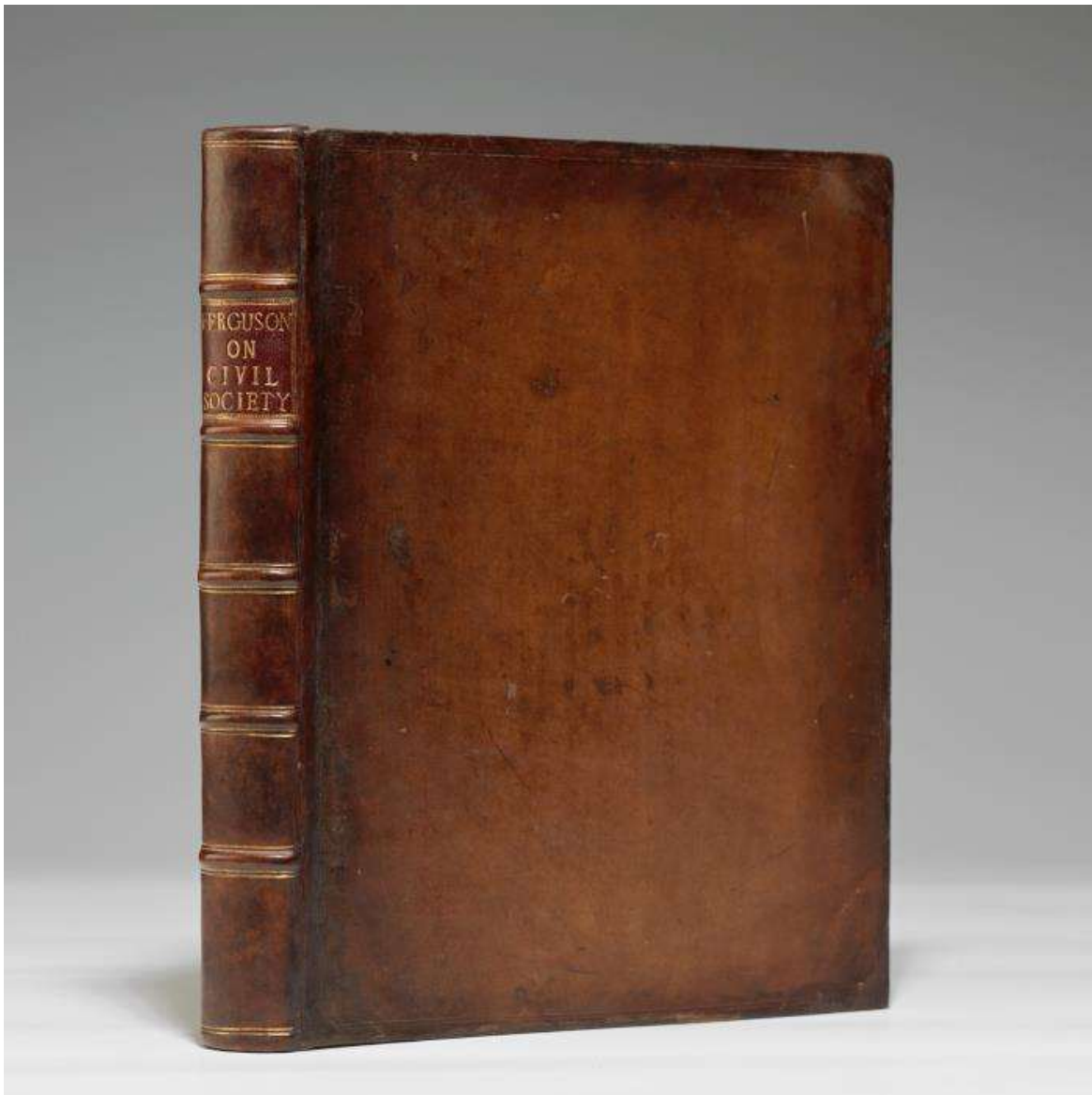
"On Civil Society" (1767), by Adam Ferguson: A Canonical Book

Curated by Stephen A Batman

Sunday, March 16, 2025

Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

Adam Ferguson, On Civil Society, 1767



AN
ESSAY
ON THE
HISTORY
OF
CIVIL SOCIETY.

By ADAM FERGUSON, LL. D.

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**"CIVIL LIBERTY WAS THE GREAT OBJECT OF FERGUSON'S ENTERPRISE":
EXCEPTIONAL FIRST EDITION OF ADAM FERGUSON'S MAGNUM OPUS, ESSAY
ON THE HISTORY OF CIVIL SOCIETY, 1767, A SEMINAL WORK OF THE
SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT PUBLISHED BEFORE ADAM SMITH'S WEALTH OF
NATIONS AND "A PRECURSOR OF TOCQUEVILLE'S DEMOCRACY"**

First edition of Ferguson's authoritative work, drawing on a Machiavellian "understanding of virtue" and positioned "between Montesquieu and Tocqueville" in its profound influence, with Jefferson owning a personal copy and Madison, who purchased his own copy in 1775, naming the Essay, with Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, as essential "for the use of the U.S. in Congress assembled," a handsome wide-margined copy, very scarce in contemporary calf boards.

Ferguson and his colleague Adam Smith, known as the "two Adams," were born the same year and stand at the center of the Scottish Enlightenment with David Hume and Francis Hutcheson. This first edition of Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, considered his magnum opus, "appeared between the publication of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1757) and *Wealth of Nations* in 1776" (Weinstein, *Two Adams*). Ferguson is also positioned by scholars—and history—"between Montesquieu and Tocqueville; his *Essay* stands between *Spirit of the Laws* and *Democracy in America*... [yet] it was more than an artful transcription of *Spirit*. For Ferguson had a science of politics which... went deeper. In particular, he formulated a theory of civil society which focused exclusively on the intrinsic and potentially fatal flaw of modern commercial society: corruption. Ferguson's theory of politics and society was the precursor of Tocqueville's *Democracy*. Like Tocqueville, Ferguson saw the potential hazards of... commerce: a new and terrible slavery was in the offing where a single tyrant would be replaced by a whole society" (McDowell, *Commerce*, 537-8).

"Admired by Samuel Johnson and Holbach, complimented by Gibbon and Voltaire, and esteemed by Hume and Smith" (ODNB), Ferguson was also credited by Marx "for the theory of alienation... and the young Hegel had read and reread the *Essay* as he was formulating his own theory of civil society" (McDowell, 539).

"Civil liberty was the great object of Ferguson's enterprise. And his design was to protect the people and their liberty from themselves" (McDowell, 548). In this and other essential respects Ferguson "differed from Hobbes and Hume, who founded morals in utility, from Adam Smith's *Theory of Sympathy*, and from the moral sense of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson" (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy* III, 187).

"Ferguson's understanding of virtue was Machiavellian... the virtuous man was not the man of quiet contemplation, but the man of high-minded-civic concern... A constitution, Ferguson argues, was not merely a body of isolated laws... [but] a national schoolmaster from whom citizens take their lessons in civility" (McDowell, 545). Both Ferguson and Founding Father James Madison "realized that beneficial conflict must take place among groups that share some

things in common" (Branson, James Madison, and the Scottish Enlightenment, 249). In his Essay Ferguson observes: "the wisest laws are... opposed or amended, by different hands; and come at last to express that medium of composition which contending parties have forced one another to adopt."

Jefferson owned a later edition of the Essay: it was "at the core of his studies of government," along with Locke's Two Treatises, Montesquieu's Spirit, and other key writings (Randall, 206). Madison, who purchased his own copy in 1775, entered it, along with Hume's "political essay" and Smith's Wealth of Nations on a 1783 list the Federal Congress requested for "books to be imported for the use of the U.S. in Congress assembled" (Branson, 236-7). "Ferguson's thought was original and distinctive" (Hill, Passionate Society, 1, 21), and in present disputes, where "the concept of 'civil society' figures, Ferguson is often invoked as authority" (Kettler, Civil Society and Politics, 2).

"His multi-layered intellectual persona, and his particular blend of Scottish, British and European concerns were thus freshly relevant to political sensibilities on the threshold of the 21st century" and remain even more so today (ODNB). ESTC T76205. Goldsmiths I:10264. Sowerby 2348. Lownees II, 791. CBEL II:955. Palgrave II:53.

Armorial bookplate of Sir James Monk of the preeminent Canadian family of statesmen who traveled to England in 1770 and was called to the English bar in 1774. On returning to Canada, he served as attorney general of Quebec, as a judge in the Vice-Admiralty Court and as a chief justice of Montreal. Both highly regarded yet often defiant in his views of the American Revolution and Canada's relationship to England, he also "took a controversial stand on slavery" when he early "declared from the bench, contrary to fact, that slave ownership in the colony was unsupported in law and systematically dismissed all suits by owners against runaway slaves" (Dictionary of Canadian Biography).

FERGUSON, Adam. An Essay on the History of Civil Society. Edinburgh: A. Millar & T. Caddell in the Strand, London, and A. Kincaid & J.Bell, Edinburgh, 1767. Large quarto, contemporary full brown calf rebaked, raised bands, red Morocco spine label; pp. (i-iii), iv-vii, (viii), (1), 2-430, (2).

The interior quite fresh with only one expertly repaired marginal tear not affecting text, faint occasional marginal soiling. Light expert restoration to extremities of contemporary calf boards. An excellent copy.

Introduction

Adam Ferguson's "An Essay on the History of Civil Society," published in 1767, stands as one of the most influential works of the Scottish Enlightenment. The book emerged during a period of significant intellectual ferment in Scotland, as thinkers grappled with questions of social development, political organization, and the nature of commercial society. Ferguson wrote this

work during a time when Scotland was experiencing rapid economic transformation following its 1707 union with England, which had opened new commercial opportunities while raising concerns about the potential corruption of traditional values⁹².

The cultural and political climate surrounding the publication was shaped by several key factors. The Scottish Enlightenment was in full bloom, with Ferguson's contemporaries like David Hume and Adam Smith developing their own influential theories about society, morality, and economics. Ferguson's work appeared between Smith's "Theory of Moral Sentiments" (1757) and his later "Wealth of Nations" (1776), positioning it at a critical juncture in the development of modern social thought². Additionally, the intellectual atmosphere was influenced by the legacy of classical republicanism, the rise of commercial society, and ongoing debates about luxury, virtue, and the proper organization of the state.

Ferguson's motivations for writing the Essay were deeply tied to his concern for preserving civic virtue in an increasingly commercial age. As a Highlander and former military chaplain, he was particularly attuned to the potential dangers of moral corruption that might accompany economic progress. His work sought to understand the development of civil society through a philosophical-historical lens, examining how societies evolve from "rude" to "polished" states while maintaining the essential moral qualities necessary for political freedom⁸.

The Author

Adam Ferguson (1723-1816) was a Scottish philosopher, historian, and a key figure in the Scottish Enlightenment. Born in Perthshire, Scotland, Ferguson came from a Highland background and was educated at the University of St. Andrews and later at the University of Edinburgh. His Highland origins gave him a distinct perspective among the Scottish literati, as he maintained a connection to traditional martial values while engaging with modern commercial society⁶.

Ferguson's career was varied and distinguished. He served as a military chaplain with the Black Watch regiment during the War of the Austrian Succession, an experience that influenced his views on the importance of martial virtue and civic participation. Later, he became Professor of Natural Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh in 1759, and subsequently Professor of Moral Philosophy in 1764, a position he held until 1785³.

Along with Adam Smith, Ferguson was considered one of the "two Adams" at the center of the Scottish Enlightenment, with both men born in the same year and making significant contributions to moral philosophy and political economy². Ferguson's intellectual approach was shaped by classical influences, particularly Stoicism, and by contemporary thinkers like Montesquieu. His work bridges the gap between Montesquieu's "Spirit of the Laws" and Tocqueville's later "Democracy in America," positioning him as an important transitional figure in the development of social and political thought².

Unlike some of his contemporaries, Ferguson maintained a skeptical stance toward certain aspects of commercial society, particularly its potential to undermine civic virtue. This perspective was informed by his Highland background and military experience, which gave him a unique vantage point from which to observe the social transformations occurring in Scotland during his lifetime⁶.

Why this is a Canonical Book

Ferguson's "Essay on the History of Civil Society" deserves canonical status for several compelling reasons. First, it represents one of the earliest and most sophisticated attempts to understand the development of human societies through what we would now recognize as a sociological lens. Ferguson pioneered the field of "philosophical history," examining how societies evolve through various stages of development while maintaining a focus on the moral and political dimensions of social life⁷.

Second, the work contains one of the most famous articulations of the concept of "unintended consequences" in social development. Ferguson observed that "nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design"⁹. This insight, which influenced thinkers from Adam Smith to Friedrich Hayek, captures the spontaneous, evolutionary nature of social institutions and provides a powerful framework for understanding social change that remains relevant today.

Third, Ferguson's analysis of the potential tensions between commercial development and civic virtue speaks directly to enduring American concerns about maintaining republican values within a market society. His work anticipates many of the debates that would later occupy American founders like Jefferson and Madison, both of whom were familiar with Ferguson's writings². Indeed, Madison purchased his own copy of the Essay in 1775 and included it on a list of books recommended for the use of the Federal Congress in 1783².

Fourth, Ferguson's conception of civil society as a sphere of civic engagement and moral development resonates with American traditions of voluntary association and civic participation. His emphasis on the importance of active citizenship and public-spiritedness aligns with the Tocquevillian vision of American democracy that has remained influential in American political thought⁸.

Finally, Ferguson's work provides a nuanced perspective on the relationship between liberty, virtue, and social progress that continues to inform American debates about the proper balance between free markets, civic responsibility, and moral development. His recognition that commercial society brings both benefits and potential dangers offers a sophisticated framework for thinking about the challenges facing modern democratic societies⁶.

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "Every step and every movement of the multitude, even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future; and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design."[9](#)

This profound observation captures Ferguson's understanding of the unintended consequences of human action and the spontaneous evolution of social institutions. It recognizes that social order emerges not from deliberate planning but from the complex interaction of countless individual choices. In our current era of increasing calls for centralized planning and control, Ferguson's insight reminds us of the limits of human foresight and the importance of allowing space for organic social development. This perspective continues to inform debates about markets, governance, and social policy.

2. "The wisest laws are... opposed or amended, by different hands; and come at last to express that medium of composition which contending parties have forced one another to adopt."[2](#)

Ferguson's recognition of the role of conflict and compromise in political development speaks directly to the American constitutional system with its checks and balances. This quote highlights Ferguson's understanding that good governance emerges not from the imposition of a single vision but from the productive tension between competing interests. In our polarized political climate, this reminder of the value of contestation and compromise in refining laws and institutions is particularly relevant.

3. "Civil liberty was the great object of Ferguson's enterprise. And his design was to protect the people and their liberty from themselves."[2](#)

This summation of Ferguson's project captures his concern with preserving liberty through the cultivation of civic virtue. Ferguson recognized that free institutions depend on citizens capable of self-restraint and public-spiritedness. In an age when democracy is increasingly challenged both by populist movements and by technocratic governance, Ferguson's emphasis on the moral foundations of liberty reminds us that free societies require virtuous citizens.

4. "The problem is not wealth, but a society where wealth replaces honour and public duty as the central means of advancing ambition."[6](#)

Ferguson's nuanced critique of commercial society identifies the real danger not in prosperity itself but in the potential displacement of civic values by purely economic considerations. This insight speaks to ongoing American concerns about materialism and the proper relationship between economic success and moral purpose. As we navigate the challenges of late capitalism,

Ferguson's perspective offers a way to embrace economic dynamism while preserving space for civic engagement and moral development.

5. "Ferguson's politics were essentially those of a conservative Whig aiming to secure the established system in eighteenth-century Britain."[6](#)

This characterization of Ferguson's political stance highlights his commitment to ordered liberty and gradual reform rather than radical transformation. His conservative Whiggism, with its emphasis on preserving valuable traditions while allowing for measured progress, resonates with important strands of American political thought. In an era of increasing ideological polarization, Ferguson's balanced approach offers a model for combining respect for established institutions with openness to necessary reforms.

Five Major Ideas

1. The Stages of Social Development

Ferguson developed a sophisticated understanding of how societies evolve through different stages of development, from "savage" to "barbarian" to "civilized" states[6](#). This stadial theory provided a framework for understanding social progress that went beyond simple narratives of advancement or decline. Ferguson recognized that each stage of development brought both gains and losses, with civilized commercial societies offering unprecedented material prosperity while potentially undermining the martial virtues and civic engagement that characterized earlier forms of social organization. This nuanced approach to social development continues to offer insights into the complex trade-offs involved in modernization and provides a valuable corrective to simplistic narratives of progress.

2. The Division of Labor and Its Consequences

Ferguson offered one of the earliest and most penetrating analyses of the division of labor and its social implications. While recognizing the economic benefits of specialization, he also identified its potential to narrow human development and undermine civic capacity. His observation that "many mechanical arts... require no capacity... the artisan is himself a machine" anticipated later critiques of industrial capitalism by thinkers like Marx[9](#). At the same time, Ferguson recognized that the division of labor was essential to modern commercial society and could not simply be abandoned. This balanced assessment of the costs and benefits of economic specialization remains relevant as we grapple with the social consequences of automation, globalization, and the knowledge economy.

3. The Concept of Civil Society

Ferguson's conception of civil society as a sphere of civic engagement and moral development represents a major contribution to political thought. Unlike later thinkers who would separate

civil society from the state, Ferguson saw civil society as encompassing the full range of political and social institutions that enable human flourishing⁸. His understanding of civil society as "polished and refined" emphasized the importance of manners, education, and civic virtue in maintaining social order. This rich conception of civil society as a moral community rather than simply a network of voluntary associations offers valuable insights for contemporary discussions about civic renewal and social capital.

4. The Importance of Moral Education

Ferguson placed great emphasis on the role of moral education in shaping character and preparing citizens for active participation in public life. He argued that humanity's moral faculties are improved through use and that we become better moral agents through continual experience of moral decision-making⁶. The role of the moral teacher, in Ferguson's view, is to "shape character," understood as "a mental outlook or set of psychological predispositions that direct the individual towards a certain set of values"⁶. This focus on character formation and moral development offers an important counterpoint to purely institutional approaches to social improvement and reminds us that free societies depend on citizens capable of self-governance.

5. The Tension Between Commerce and Virtue

Ferguson's work explores the complex relationship between commercial development and civic virtue. While recognizing the benefits of commerce in terms of material prosperity and refinement, he also worried about its potential to undermine the public-spiritedness necessary for political freedom. Ferguson's concern was not with wealth itself but with "a society where wealth replaces honour and public duty as the central means of advancing ambition"⁶. This nuanced perspective on the moral challenges of commercial society offers a sophisticated framework for thinking about how to reconcile economic dynamism with civic responsibility, a challenge that remains central to American political and cultural debates.

Three Major Controversies

1. The Critique of Commercial Society

Ferguson's ambivalent stance toward commercial society has generated significant controversy among interpreters of his work. Some scholars have positioned Ferguson as a critic of commercial society who stood apart from mainstream Scottish Enlightenment thinkers like Adam Smith and David Hume. This interpretation emphasizes Ferguson's concerns about the potential for commerce to undermine civic virtue and his praise for martial qualities that seemed at odds with commercial values⁶. Others, however, argue that Ferguson's "opposition to and doubts about commercial society have been unhelpfully exaggerated" and that he was in fact "a partisan for civilization, a proponent for commerce" whose views were largely in line with those of his contemporaries⁶. This debate reflects broader disagreements about the relationship

between markets and morality and continues to inform discussions about the proper balance between economic freedom and civic responsibility.

2. The Republican Question

Ferguson's relationship to the republican tradition has been another source of controversy. Some interpreters have emphasized Ferguson's republican credentials, pointing to his concern with civic virtue, his advocacy for a militia, and his warnings about corruption. From this perspective, Ferguson appears as a classical republican critic of modern commercial society⁸. Others, however, argue that Ferguson was "sceptical of the relevance of republican (or democratic) systems for contemporary Scotland" and that his praise of civic virtue stemmed not from independent landholding but from "the sort of education and manners his philosophical project set out to achieve"⁶. This debate touches on fundamental questions about the compatibility of republican values with modern commercial society and the proper institutional arrangements for preserving liberty in complex, diverse societies.

3. The Question of Progress

Ferguson's complex view of social development has generated controversy about his attitude toward progress. Some readers have emphasized the pessimistic elements in Ferguson's thought, particularly his concerns about corruption and decline in advanced societies. From this perspective, Ferguson appears as a critic of modernity who questioned whether material progress necessarily led to moral improvement¹. Others, however, stress Ferguson's commitment to improvement and his belief in the superiority of commercial society despite its potential pitfalls. According to this view, Ferguson was fundamentally optimistic about the possibility of combining commercial development with civic virtue through proper education and institutions⁶. This debate reflects broader disagreements about the nature and direction of modernity and continues to inform discussions about whether advanced societies can sustain the moral and civic resources necessary for their own preservation.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read Ferguson's "Essay on the History of Civil Society" for several compelling reasons. First, the work provides a sophisticated framework for understanding the relationship between economic development and civic health, a tension that remains central to American political and cultural debates. Ferguson's nuanced perspective on the benefits and challenges of commercial society offers valuable insights for those seeking to reconcile market dynamism with republican values.

Second, Ferguson's emphasis on the importance of active citizenship and civic virtue speaks directly to ongoing concerns about civic disengagement and political polarization in American society. His recognition that free institutions depend on citizens capable of self-governance and

public-spiritedness reminds us that democracy requires more than formal rights and procedures—it requires a citizenry committed to the common good.

Third, Ferguson's analysis of how societies develop through unintended consequences provides a powerful corrective to both naive optimism and cynical pessimism about social change. His understanding that social institutions emerge from human action but not human design encourages a humility about social planning while affirming the importance of individual agency in shaping collective outcomes.

Fourth, Ferguson's work offers valuable historical perspective on the intellectual foundations of American political thought. His influence on figures like Jefferson and Madison connects his ideas directly to the American founding, making his work essential reading for those seeking to understand the philosophical underpinnings of American democracy.

Finally, Ferguson's balanced approach to tradition and progress, combining respect for established institutions with openness to necessary reforms, offers a model of political wisdom that transcends ideological divisions. In an era of increasing polarization, his measured conservatism provides a valuable example of how to navigate social change without abandoning essential values.

For all these reasons, Ferguson's "Essay on the History of Civil Society" deserves to be read and pondered by all Americans concerned with the future of their republic. Its insights into the complex relationship between liberty, virtue, and social development remain as relevant today as they were in the eighteenth century, offering guidance for those seeking to preserve and renew the civic foundations of American democracy.

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