ADAM FERGUSON (1723-1816)

Adam Ferguson was a remarkable person and, in my opinion, though much neglected, one of the major figures in the history of sociological thought. The son of a minister and a child of the Manse, he had the distinction, or may we say advantage, of having served for some years as Chaplain to the 42nd Regiment or ' The Black Watch'' (he fought, so it is said, at the battle of Fontenoy); and he was unique among the Scottish moral philosophers in that he was a Gaelic-speaking highlander. He appears to have been a rugged character, sometimes rather difficult; an ultra-conservative and and an anti-Stuart; and when one reads about his life one can well understand what he meant when he said that men are at their best when they have difficulties to surmount.

To estimate Ferguson one must see him and his writings in the intellectual setting of his time and place; and for this it might be necessary to dwell on the Jacobite troubles, the suppression of Scottish independence, rapid economic changes, and an element of provincial isolation and language difficulty. Without going into the historical and social setting however it will be sufficient to note how much Ferguson was an intellectual child of his time if I mention the names of Hume, Reid, Adam Smith, Lord Montboddo, Lord Kames, John Millar and Ferguson's pupil and his successor in the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh, Dugald Stewart. Truly 'Scotland's Agustan age'; two of whom are of particular interest for us, the man I am going to talk about now and Lord Kames.

Ferguson received recognition at the time he wrote, especially in Germany, where he had much influence on Schiller and others. Also, in France, Saint-Simon and Comte owed much to him. In our own country, and later, J. S. Mill fully acknowledged his debt to him. Nevertheless he has since been forgotten, more or less, for over a century and a revival, though not a general one, in his writings has only recently taken place - regretfully one has to say in America (Lehman, 1931, and Kettler, 1965) and Germany (Kaneko, 1904, and Jogland, 1959), and not in his own country.

Ferguson left the Ministry of the Church of Scotland in 1754 to become Professor, first of all of Natural Philosophy and then of Pneumatic and Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh, and it was there he wrote his books during a long life on a variety of philosophical (as he and his contemporaries understood the word) subjects. His first and best known work, the one I am for the most part going to restrict my comments to, was An Essay on the History of Civil Society (1766). I do not think his Institutes of Moral Philosophy (lecture notes, 1772) or his Principles of Moral and Political Science (two large volumes, 1792) add much of sociological importance to what he had said in his first book; in both there is much tedious moralizing and what 18th century philosophers regarded as psychology ; I suppose that was only to have been expected of a moral philosopher of the period, especially of a Scottish Calvinist one. All the same one can at times sympathize with Hume's irritation and even Sir Leslie Stephen's stricture of superficiality. Ferguson's The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic (1783), a favourite topic among writers of the time, comprises five volumes of almost pure narrative spiced with some rhetoric.

This work has little sociological value; but it is only fair to say that Ferguson was a very good classical scholar.

The Essay is a fascinating book if you like, as I do, the ornate, even florid or inflated English 18th century style of writing. One has, it is true, to put up with a good deal of sententious verbosity (the book is 430 pages long), but in spite of all the moralizing there is much sound thought in the Essay, which, it should be said right away, shows throughout and very clearly the influence of Montesquieu, as Ferguson himself says. It should perhaps also be added that Hume, whose successor he was as Keeper of the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh, though they were great friends and much admired each other, regarded the book unfavourably with regard to both style and content (not that that should necessarily discourage us). If we are to make any further comments on the author's personal life and values as reflected in his writings it may be said that while he abandoned his clerical career he did not go out of his way, like Condorcet for instance, to attack Christianity. After all, he had once been a Minister and a Chaplain. He became I suppose what one might describe as some sort of Deist: there is much 'The Author of Nature', and much of the reasoning from 'design'.

Ferguson's book illustrates many of the basic assumptions we find in modern social anthropology. In the first place he says that the desire to give some account of the earliest form of human society has led to fruitless enquiry and wild suppositions because, while the natural historian thinks himself obliged to collect facts and not to offer mere conjecture, 'it is only in what relates to himself, and in matters the most important, and the most easily known, that he substitutes hypothesis instead of reality ... (p. 3-4). Here we have a clear statement of the scope of a study of human societies - they are part of nature and must be studied, as is any other part of nature, by observation and induction.

Especially in the study of early man must conjecture be avoided. It must not be assumed, as it so often is, that a mere negation of what we find among ourselves is a sufficient description of man in his original state. This is simply judging by our own standards and is, moreover, going beyond, or against, the testimonies of those who have had opportunities of seeing mankind in their rudest conditions. Nor is direct observation replaced by the written traditions of a people about the earlier phases of their history. These are for the most part mere conjectures and fictions of subsequent ages and bear the stamp of the times through which a people has passed rather than that to which the descriptions are supposed to relate (he was thinking of the Iliad and Odyssey and also of writers like Vergil and Tasso, who give us historical information only about the conceptions and sentiments of the age in which they wrote). In spite of all this excellent advice Ferguson, like most of his contempories, relied largely on introspection, using historical examples, taken from such classical authors as he knew, when they illustrated or corroborated conclusions reached by deductions from philosophical axioms or psychological speculations rather than from the facts themselves.

Now, when Ferguson speaks of human societies as being 'natural' he has in mind the political theories of his day. He will have nothing to do with hypotheses, e.g. of Hobbes, Locke and others, about a state of nature in which men lived without any form or order, and more particularly of government. That kind of state of nature will be found in the struggle between princes and subjects rather than among rude tribes. He is also scornful of those who imagine that they are studying 'natural man' when they interview a wild man caught in the woods - an 18th century pastime. Human nature is a product of social life and man is only 'natural' in society, whether it be rude or polished. Therefore an 18th century gentleman is not less 'natural' than a savage Redskin of North America; indeed, in one sense he is more so, because the potentialities of men in polished societies have greater scope for expression. Therefore we must not oppose art (culture) to nature, for art itself is natural to man: 'If we are asked therefore, where the state of nature is to be found? We may answer, It is here: and it matters not whether we are understood to speak in the island of Great Britain, at the Cape of Good Hope, on the Straits of Magellan . . . If the palace be unnatural, the cottage is so no less; and the Highest refinements of political and moral apprehension, are not more artificial in their kind, than the first operations of sentiment and reason' (p. 12). He also says 'all the actions of men are equally the result of their nature (pp. 14-15).

It may here be commented, if only as an aside, that the idea that primitive peoples are in some sense more 'natural' than civilized peoples is still an idea commonly met with in everyday thought. In Ferguson's day it was the centre of much philosophical discussion. He held that it is futile to try to contrast hypothetical man living outside society ('natural man') with man living in society. Did not Aristotle long ago insist that man is by nature a political (social) creature. The question of what in a man in any society is to be attributed to biological inheritance and what to society and culture is altogether different and one which concerns equally both rude and polished man.

It is true that man, unlike the beasts, is endowed not with just instinct but also with intelligence and will and so shapes his own destiny up to a point, though, it must be added, only up to a point. For societies, being natural, do not develop by will or design but of their own nature, like trees: 'He who first said "I will appropriate this field; I will leave it to my heirs"; did not perceive, that he was laying the foundation of civil laws and political establishments' (p. 186). Men, that is, arrive at ends they may not aim at; they are free to choose but they cannot predict what will happen as a result of their choice, for societies arise from instincts and not from speculations, so that what happens is 'indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design' (p.187). Institutions spring out of the general conditions of a society and are not the conscious creations of men, far less of any particular man, however gifted. Statesmen who think that they control events are like the fly in the fable who thought it was turning the wheel on which it sat. How often since have sociologists told us this, especially the Marxist ones!

Since man is essentially a social creature he cannot be understood except as a member of a group. So our first task is to get some idea of the nature of a social group. All accounts

from all parts of the earth 'represent mankind as assembled in troops and companies . . . (p. 4). Therefore, 'Mankind are to be taken in groups, 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' (p. 6). Then again: 'Mankind have always wandered or settled, agreed or quarrelled, in troops and companies. The cause of their assembling, whatever it be, is the principle of their alliance or union' (p. 23). In the Principles we read 'Families may be considered as the elementary forms of society or establishments the most indespensibly necessary to the existence and preservation of the kind'. The family in some form or other is universal. Comte was to say very much the same.

The study of man is therefore a study of institutions in relation to one another in the total conditions of life, including national character and climate (Ferguson picked up some odd ideas about the influence of climate from Montesquieu). He discusses at length, closely following the classification and method of analysis of Montesquieu, the nature of various forms of government, democratic, aristocratic, monarchical and despotic, observing the circumstances in which each is found and the various forms of other institutions found with each. He discusses the beginnings of property in agricultural and pastoral societies (this notion of property and the part it has played in social development was, perhaps rightly, an obsession among philosophers of the period) and the distribution of these two types of societies over the earth's surface and with reference to climate and some of the main cultural features of each. Both, however, show the beginnings of property and the inequalities and subordination which go with it, and jurisdiction and government which accompany them. Property comes about in passing from the savage to the barbarous state. He also discusses how superstition disputes with valour (he never quite ceases to be a soldier) the road to power: the 'magic wand comes in competition with the sword itself' (p. 161) - cp Condorcet, Frazer and others). He discusses how population grows with increase in wealth and security (here again cp. Condorcet) and is always limited by the means of subsistence. He has an excellent discussion of the circumstances in which cultural borrowing takes place (p. 25 seq.). Also how as a result of borrowing knowledge increases: 'When nations succeed one another in the career of discoveries and inquiries, the last is always the most knowing. Systems of science are gradually formed. The globe itself is traversed by degrees, and the history of every age, when past, is an accession of knowledge to those who succeed. The Romans were more knowing than the Greeks; and every scholar of modern Europe, is in this sense, more learned than the most accomplished person that ever bore either of those celebrated names. But is he on that account their superior?' (p. 44) - (once again cp. Condorcet.) Anyhow, no people borrows from another unless they are ready for the loan. He discusses many other topics of anthropological interest - all of which I cannot, obviously, enter into now. Throughout he adheres to his general viewpoint, that culture, like society, is a natural growth, collectively produced, and having its existence outside, and apart from individual minds, which they shape. Was not Durkheim to say much the same as his main thesis a century later?

Since I cannot appreciate all he wrote, I shall mention only two of the topics he treated, as examples of his sociological insights - war and the division of labour - in both of which his idea of a society being some kind of system of balanced parts comes out quite clearly. A policital structure is a system of opposed groups. The Hottentots, he says, quoting Kolben, raid each other for cattle and women, but they only do this to bring their neighbours to war: 'Such depredations then are not the foundation of a war, but the effects of a hostile intention already conceived. The nations of North America, who have no herds to preserve, nor settlements to defend, are yet engaged in almost perpetual wars, for which they can assign no reason, but the point of honour, and a desire to continue the struggle their fathers maintained. They do not regard the spoils of an enemy; and the warrior who has seized any booty, easily parts with it to the first person who comes in his way' (p. 33). In other words, wars arise not so much from an opposition of interests as of sentiments, and the supposed causes of war are only its occasions - the real cause is to be looked for in the functioning of the political structure: 'But it is in vain to expect that we can give to the multitude of a people a sense of union among themselves, without admitting hostility to those who oppose them. Could we at once, in the case of any nation extinguish the emulation which is excited from abroad, we should probably break or weaken the bands of society at home, and close the busiest scenes of national occupations and virtues' (p. 37). Again: 'The society and concourse of other men, are not more necessary to form the individual, than the rivalship and competition of nations are to invigorate the principles of political life in a state' (pp. 182-3). Athens was necessary to Sparta (for which state and way of life Ferguson had great admiration) as steel is to flint in making fire. When the kingdoms of Spain united and the great fiefs in France were annexed to the crown the nations of Great Britain were joined. Social groups, that is, maintain their cohesion through opposition to like groups. Hence the structural necessity of war - both hot and cold (cp. Gunplowics). In another part of his book he says 'small and simple tribes, who in their domestic society have the firmest union, are in their state of opposition as separate nations, frequently animated with the most implacable hatred ... Even where no particular claim to superiority is formed, the repugnance to union, the frequent wars, or rather the perpetual hostilities, which take place among rude nations and separate clans, discover how much our species is disposed to opposition, as well as to concert' (pp. 30-31).

My second example is what Ferguson says about division of labour. A people can make no great progress in cultivating the arts of life until they have committed to different persons the several tasks which require a peculiar skill and attention. This cannot be done in the savage stage and only partly in the barbarian stage. All this changes with greater prosperity and the development of property, and then we get division of labour, not only in production but in all the activities of social life: politics, war, civil government, commerce and so on. 'These separate professions are made, like the parts of an engine, to concur to a purpose, without any concert of their own' (pp. 278-9). 'The savage who knows no distinction but that of his merit, of his sex, or of his species, and to whom his community is the sovereign object of his affection, is astonished to find, that in

a scene of this nature, his being a man does not qualify him for any station whatever; he flies to the woods with amazement, distaste, and aversion' (p. 278). Then again: 'Even the savage still less than the citizen, can be made to quit that manner of life in which he is trained: he loves that freedom of mind which will not be bound to any task, and which owns no superior: however tempted to mix with polished nations, and to better his fortune, the first moment of liberty brings him back to the woods again ...' (p. 145).

Division of labour is no less a ground for subordination than difference in natural talents and dispositions and the unequal division of property; and it results in different sets of values and modes of custom in each class or profession in society, just as types of society have their special character - the Roman is a soldier, the Carthaginian a merchant; and the subjects of a republic and a monarchy differ in their outlooks, aims and behaviour. Nevertheless, societies in which there has taken place division of labour, in spite of divergences, present a uniform structural similarity. The general point Ferguson is making is that just as a political society forms part of a system of such societies, maintained in a balance through opposition, so internally the same society is a system of classes, ranks, professions, etc., which have an interdependence, it being precisely this which determines the moral solidarity of a complex society (cp. Durkheim). Furthermore he says 'But apart from these considerations, the separation of professions, while it seems to promise improvement of skill, and is actually the cause why the productions of every art become more perfect as commerce advances; yet in its termination, and ultimate effects, serves, in some measure, to break the bands of society, to substitute form in place of ingenuity, and to withdraw individuals from the common scene of occupation, on which the sentiments of the heart, and the mind, are most happily employed' (p. 334).

There are many correspondences one could draw attention to between what Ferguson is saying here and what others have said before and since, but I shall make only two comments. The first is a reference to the purely historical question, whether Ferguson got what he wrote about the division of labour, or at any rate an indication of its significance, from his Coeval Adam Smith. Probably he did, through lectures and private converse. The second comment is that it has been said that Ferguson had the idea that what follows division of labour is what later came to be termed 'alienation'. For this he got a pat on the back from Karl Marx (e.g. The Poverty of Philosophy, 1910, pp. 109 and 187); and in a way it is true, for he saw, and stated, clearly that division, specialization, can bring about what Durkheim called anomie, make a man feel that he does not belong fully to the society of which he is a member, make him fly 'to the woods'. What he wrote may also be linked to what has been written about Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft.

As I have remarked earlier, Ferguson has much to say on many topics to which in a brief lecture I can only make allusion. The anthropologist will note that he was very interested in primitive - what he called 'rude' or 'savage' or 'barbarous' peoples - a study of whose social life he considered most valuable in that it enables us to make signigicant comparisons between the simpler societies and the more complex (cp. Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau). He gives a good account, based on Jesuit sources, of what was then

known of the American Indians, and in his chapter 'Of Rude Nations prior to the Establishment of Property' (pp. 125 seq.) he makes many sensible and penetrating observations about these savages, though on the whole he tends to romanticise them somewhat. His brilliant and acutely sensitive skit on travellers' reports is highly amusing.

However, leaving many topics aside, it will be evident to you from what has already been said that Ferguson, conceiving, as he did, of societies being natural systems of some kind, and hence that they can be studied as such much as the natural sciences study the phenomena with which they deal, it was necessary for him to hold also that there are general sociological laws ('principles') to be discovered, by reference to which variations can be explained. 'In collecting the materials of history, we are seldom willing to put up with our subject merely as we find it. We are loth to be embarrassed with a multiplicity of particulars, and apparent inconsistencies. In theory we profess the investigation of general principles; and in order to bring the matter of our inquiries within the reach of our comprehension, are disposed to adopt any system' (pp. 23-4). Again: 'To collect a multiplicity of particulars under general heads, and to refer a variety of operations to their common principle, is the object of science' (p. 40). May I quote him again - I prefer on a matter of this kind to quote than to paraphrase - :'In order to have a general and comprehensive knowledge of the whole, we must be determined on this, as on every other subject, to overlook many particulars and singulatities, distinguishing different governments; to fix our attention on certain points, in which many agree; and thereby establish a few general heads, under which the subject may be distinctly considered. When we have marked the characteristics which form the general points of coincidence; when we have pursued them to their consequences in the several modes of legislation, execution, and judicature, in the establishments which relate to police, commerce, religion, or domestic life; we have made an acquisition of knowledge, which, though it does not supersede the necessity of experience, may serve to direct our inquiries, and, in the midst of affairs, to give an order and a method for the arrangement of particulars that occur to our observation' (pp. 97-8). So we have to fix our attention on the significant general features of social institutions and overlook many particulars and singularities - mere events and personalities, these are 'accidents'. A Classification of types may then be made, and must be made if any general and comprehensive laws are to be reached; this is the manner in which all the natural sciences have proceeded: they have traced facts to their general laws. He lays the same emphasis on the difference between the mere recording of facts and their relation to laws in the Institutes and the Principles: history is concerned with the detail of particulars, science with general principles (laws).

If there are general principles they must be dynamic principles for, like most of his contemporaries, Ferguson was chiefly interested in the study of social development. Indeed, he tells us, the great difference between man and animals is that 'in the human kind, the species has a progress as well as the individual; they build in every subsequent age on foundations formerly laid ...' (p. 7). Every scholar in Europe is more learned than the most

accomplished of the Greeks and Romans, though this does not mean that he is their superior. How often have we been told this, that dwarfs on the backs of giants see further than the giants themselves? If I may quote our author again: 'This 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' (pp. 1-2). Adam Ferguson was a great believer in progress and laws of progress.

Now, the method to be used in making the historical reconstruction necessary for the earlier phases of a people's social development so that the principles of progress can be revealed is that of what Duglad Stewart called 'conjectural', that is, hypothetical, history. Early phases in the history of our own society can, it was supposed, be known by observation of how people now live who are still in those stages. 'What should distinguish a German or a Briton, in the habits of his mind or his body, in his manners or apprehensions, from an American (Indian), who, like him, with his bow and his dart, is left to traverse the forest; and in a like severe or variable climate, is obliged to subsist by the chase. If, in advanced years, we would form a just notion of our progress from the cradle, we must have recourse to the nursery, and from the example of those who are still in the period of life we mean to describe, take our representation of past manners, that cannot, in any other way, be recalled' (p. 122). Ferguson's interest in savages was chiefly that they illustrated a phase, he supposed, in our own history; and the evidences of prehistory give support to his supposition.

As always, the conception of laws ('principles') combined with the notion of progress inevitably led Ferguson to formulate a paradigm of stages drawn up on criteria of production and productive relations. With these ecomomic stages go certain types of institutions and certain cultural traits. The criteria of Ferguson were much the same, and understandably so, as those of other writers who reflected on the different forms of society still to be observed (e.g. Condorcet). The earliest stage is that of hunting, fishing, or collecting the natural produce of the soil; in which there is little property and scarcely even the beginnings of subordination or government. The next stage is that of herders, who have property and hence distinctions between rich and poor, patron and client, master and servant. This distinction 'must create a material difference of character, and may furnish two separate heads, under which to consider the history of mankind in their rudest state; that of the savage, who is not yet acquainted with property; and that of the barbarian, to whom it is, although not ascertained by laws, a principal object of care and desire', (p.124). Property is the mother of progress, for it implies laws and habits of industry (cp. Condorcet). In all this Ferguson leans heavily on Montesquieu.

In fact we see in this book the essential ideas which make Montesquieu's Esprit so brilliant and original a classic. There is the same insistance on an objective study of social facts and on the need to reach formulations of a general kind based on a systematic comparison of societies. There is also the same emphasis on the logical consistency between series of social facts that we are later to find so strongly emphasized by Comte, and the need to explain institutions by reference to their functions in the activities of the total society rather than by reference to

doctrines or philosophical axioms about social life or human nature (not that he always lived up to his exhortations in this respect). Where he differs most from Montesquieu is in a more rigid, though far from mechanical, idea of what might constitute a sociological law, and in the notion of unilinear social development, stages through which all societies pass and which can be reconstructed by use of what later became known as the comparative method, a notion deriving from a combination of the ideas of law and progress, the first largely a product of discoveries in physics, the second, according to Comte, a consequence of the collapse of Catholic feudal institutions.

E.E. Evans-Pritchard

Bibliography

Anon. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Ferguson, Adam', Vol.9, p.172, N.D.

Bouet, H. 'Adam Ferguson et ses idees politiques et sociales', Journal des Economistes, 1898

Bryson, Gladys, Man and Society, 1945

Buddeberg, Theodor, 'Ferguson als Sociologe', Jahrbücher fur National Ekonomie, 1925

Bury, J. B. The Idea of Progress, 1920

Concise Dictionary of National Biography, Part I, 1953 impression p.426

Dunbar, James, Essays on the History of Mankind in Rude and Cultivated Ages, 1780

Dunning, William A. A History of Political Theories from Rousseau to Spencer, 1922

Durkheim, Emile La division du Travail Social, 16th edit. 1932

Fay, C. R. Adam Smith and the Scotland of his Day, 1956

Ferguson, Adam, An Essay on the History of Civil Society, 1766, (Duncan Forbes, editor, 1967)

_____, Institutes of Moral Philosophy, 1772

_____, The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic, 1783

_____, Principles of Moral and Political Science, 2 vols, 1969

Graham, Henry Grey, Scottish Men of Letters in the Eighteenth Century, 1901

_____, The Social Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century, 5th edit. 1969

Jogland, Herta H. Ursprunge und Grundlagen der Sociologie bei Adam Ferguson, 1959

Kames, Lord Henry Home, Sketches of the History of Man 2 vols 1774

Kaneko, Umaji, Moralphilosophie Adam Ferguson's 1904

Kettler, David, The Social and Political Thought of Adam Ferguson 1965

Lehmann, William C. Adam Ferguson and the Beginnings of Modern Sociology, 1930

_____, 'Adam Ferguson', International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, 1968

MacRae, Donald Ideology and Society, 1961

_____, 'Adam Ferguson', The Founding Fathers of Social Science 1969

Marx, Karl The Poverty of Philosophy 1910

Mossner, Ernest Campbell The Life of Hume 1954

Small, John 'Biographical Sketch of Adam Ferguson', Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh 1864

Stephen, Sir Leslie History of English Thought in the 18th Century 3rd edit., 1902

Whitney, Lois Primitivism and the Idea of Progress 1934