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Empire and Liberty in Adam Ferguson's Republicanism

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ABSTRACT

Adam Ferguson's imperial thought casts new light on the age-old republican dilemma of the tension between empire and liberty. Generations of republican writers had been haunted by this issue as the decline of Rome proved that imperial expansion would eventually ruin the liberty of a state. Many eighteenth-century Scottish thinkers regarded this as an insoluble conundrum and thus became critics of empire. Ferguson shared their basic views but, paradoxically, was still able to defend the British Empire in the debates over the American Revolution. His argument effectively offered a viable solution to the republican dilemma, which distinguished him from his contemporaries. In light of this, I argue that political representation was the pivotal conception for Ferguson to make empire and liberty compatible. It was on this ground that he could advocate the union with Ireland, which he believed would lead to a lasting balance of power in Europe.

KEYWORDS

Adam Ferguson; British Empire; liberty; balance of power; political representation; American Revolution; Anglo-Irish Union

Conventional interpretations of Adam Ferguson's republicanism often situate him in the Machiavellian tradition which emphasises civic virtue and liberty, or the Aristotelian tradition which underscores the idea of 'man as a political animal' embodied through civic participation.¹ Indeed, Ferguson himself put them into practice by joining military and clerical services and being a strong advocate of the Scottish militia. Yet, recent studies have challenged these readings, targeting the view that Ferguson, as an admirer of ancient Rome, emphasised the value of civil discord.² This article intends to address Ferguson's approach to the 'republican dilemma'³ of empire and liberty based on the new light shed by this stream of scholarship. Specifically, I want to indicate that there remains an unresolved tension in recent literature, namely, Ferguson's paradoxical attitudes towards the conception of empire in general and the status of the British Empire between 1760 and 1800 in particular. This period encompasses the most important political developments in modern British history: the American Revolution and the union with Ireland. Ferguson's republicanism, understood as a kind of political thinking that endorsed the political order maintained through the check and balance of power, significantly shaped his responses to these events. In other words, republicanism, for him, should be a Montesquieuian project prescribed to modern politics, preferably fulfilled by a mixed government.⁴

Ferguson and his contemporaries, such as David Hume and Adam Smith, deemed it impossible to preserve liberty while pursuing the greatness of the state owing to the historical lessons of Rome.⁵ They became increasingly worried about the rise of commerce in their time that rendered imperial

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expansion inevitable. Ferguson's moral language often leads commentators to misconstrue him as a nostalgic republican who longed to revive ancient morality and politics, hoping these would be the remedy for modern Britain.⁶ But had this been the case, Ferguson would have been trapped in the Pocockean conundrum: if virtue gave rise to the self-destructing character of imperial ventures,⁷ why should he follow other republicans to promote the significance of civic virtue to preserve liberty?

A tension arises if we examine Ferguson's anti-imperial position together with his defence of the British Empire, especially in his debate with Richard Price.⁸ Their dispute began in 1776 when Price published the first part of *Two Tracts on Civil Liberty*. Price's concept of liberty – which Ferguson viewed as licentiousness – was the theoretical ground for his criticism of taxation without representation. Ferguson particularly abhorred this line of argument, as the antecedent of Rome had attested that its spirit of equality could undermine the liberty of the whole empire. His position is commonly read in the context of the emergence of modern democracy,⁹ or a wider discourse on patriotism,¹⁰ but the tension remains unsolved: how could Ferguson's general anti-imperial position be compatible with his defence of the British Empire?

My reading suggests that Ferguson's take on the dilemma of empire and liberty sophisticatedly applied his conception of political representation. Moreover, Ferguson used his experience in the American affairs to formulate 'a political education that envisioned the possibility of encapsulating or hiving off the despotic elements inherent in imperial ventures and that taught the necessity of bargaining with even the most disorienting effects of revolution'.¹¹ Recent studies have rightly indicated that Ferguson's anti-imperial position was 'to demonstrate how easily imperial expansion destroyed liberty'.¹² But in the British case, Ferguson has recognised that the republican dilemma operated in a different milieu – representative politics was not available to the Romans.¹³ In light of this, his anti-imperial position was 'a post-Montesquieu attack on the project of reconciling liberty with empire' indeed,¹⁴ but, I would argue, its main target was the kind of empire that lacked a well-functioning system of political representation. It is on this ground that Ferguson's defence of the British Empire as a free state can be seen as a solution to the republican dilemma.

Emphasising the Montesquieuian trajectory in the British political discourse enables commentators to re-position Ferguson's place in the British constitutional debates according to his responses to the American Revolution and the Wilkes riots in the 1760s and 70s – Ferguson stood firmly with the British government in both events.¹⁵ One could thereby argue that Ferguson's defence of the British Empire in his reply to Price was simply because of the government's commission,¹⁶ which means there is no need to problematise the tension in his thought further. Yet, as recent studies suggest, Ferguson's critiques of both events as well as his remarks on the decline of Rome drew heavily on his concerns over popular power. He even considered Montesquieu to have underestimated its threat to British politics.¹⁷

The danger arose from the fact that public opinion could sabotage political stability, which leads us to a subject overlooked by recent studies, namely, the union with Ireland. Ferguson was enormously interested in this issue and paid much attention to the Irish public opinion. Although he had no publication commenting on Ireland, his correspondence in the 1780s and 90s shows that the Irish problem was as important as the American one for him.¹⁸ Ferguson's support of the union with Ireland once again contradicted his anti-imperial position. By taking the Irish issue into account, I argue that Ferguson's solution to the republican dilemma ultimately aimed at the balance of power among European states. This could only become a lasting international order when Britain was able to form a strong union that ensured the stability of the empire.

I begin with a discussion on the decline of Rome and its lesson to set the scene for the republican dilemma of empire and liberty. Montesquieu's view conveyed a strong message to his contemporaries that domestic order and the balance of power were the keys to maintain a state. I subsequently investigate Scottish opinion on this issue. The fate of ancient empires rendered Ferguson and his contemporaries' highly critical of the British imperial policies. But they also reckoned that modern states were in a position to potentially alter the trajectory of this dilemma. Finally, I look into

Ferguson's defence of the British Empire during the American Revolution and his comments on the Irish questions, including free trade and legislative independence. We shall see his anti-imperial position stemmed from a Montesquieuan commitment to the ideas of order and balance. It was not only compatible with his apology for the British Empire but, in fact, also the driving force of his defence.

1. Political balance and the decline of Rome

The historiography of Rome's progress and decline inaugurates the dilemma of empire and liberty. Many republican writers' commitment to free states was haunted by Rome's downfall, where they observed a liberty-losing tendency in the course of pursuing the greatness of the state.¹⁹ History also showed, paradoxically, that the greatness of Rome resulted from its liberty. Some writers believed that Rome's decline began when the citizens lost their virtue and public spirit. This narrative has a classical origin that dates back to Sallust.²⁰ They attributed Rome's moral decadence to the egotism that invoked malign sentiments such as greediness and the love of luxury, which gave corruption the chance to harm the well-being of the whole community. Some writers thus advocated the importance of civic virtue to prevent national decline.²¹

Although Montesquieu did acknowledge some points in his predecessors' accounts, he shifted the focus of discussion by emphasising the collapse of political balance. This move suggests Montesquieu recognised that the civic humanist view was no longer useful for eighteenth-century politics.²² For him, imperial expansion and the extension of civil rights were the main causes of Rome's decline, both of which signified the course of undermining political balance. When the conquered nations realised that Roman citizenship entailed the right of 'universal sovereignty',²³ they were resolute to gain the same civic status and demand more political power. Revolts against the central government thus began to sabotage domestic peace and security. Some ambitious men took the chance to form parties and became demagogues who manipulated the populace. Rome consequently 'was no longer a city whose people had but a single spirit, a single love of liberty, a single hatred of tyranny'.²⁴ This amounted to both domestic disorder and an unbalanced multinational relation since the nature of the republic had changed under the shuffle of the demographic structure. It became a conquest republic that imposed despotic control over the conquered nations, which had a particularly alarming implication for modern Europe. As Montesquieu observed in *The Spirit of the Laws*, this could be the case of the Anglo-Irish relation at the time.²⁵

Montesquieu regarded the concentration of power under the prolonged military command as a grave issue since it sabotaged the balance of power within the empire and potentially gave rise to despotism. Its negative effects began when the soldiers 'recognize no one but their general, to base all their hopes on him, and to feel more remote from the city. They were no longer the soldiers of the republic, but those of Sulla, Marius, Pompey and Caesar'.²⁶ The generals hence 'sensed their own strength' to challenge the empire's central administration.²⁷ Their power was based on their capacity of leading the soldiers, in which obedience constituted the fundamental principle. This reminds us of Montesquieu's view that 'in despotic states the nature of government requires extreme obedience, and the prince's will, once known, should produce its effect as infallibly as does one ball thrown against another'.²⁸ Under the circumstances, 'virtue is not at all necessary to it and honour would be dangerous'.²⁹

Montesquieu's thinking was, however, less deterministic than other early modern republican writers, as his politics of moderation offered two possible ways to prevent the decline of a state. First, the cause for 'free states to last a shorter time than others' was the fluctuation of good and bad fortune. 'A wise republic' should not risk exposing itself to this instability and should only aspire to the 'perpetuation of its condition'.³⁰ In the ancient case, this meant that Rome should not have expanded its empire so rapidly that it lost its liberty.³¹ Second, although civil strife was harmful to the state, it should be harmonised rather than eliminated. Montesquieu acknowledged the necessity for such conflicts to exist, for it was impossible and against nature to 'ask for men in a

free state who are bold in war and timid in peace'.³² Tranquillity under a 'union in a body politic' could be a sign that the state had lost its liberty for long. Montesquieu was convinced that true union resided in harmony – that is, all parts of the political community 'however opposed they may appear, cooperate for the general good of society'.³³ This order was the result of moderating the dissension among the people. In contrast, 'Asiatic despotism' failed to recognise the necessity of moderation, and thus its political union represented 'not citizens who are united but dead bodies buried one next to the other'.³⁴ It is therefore crucial to recognise that the Montesquieuan balance of power did not eliminate the possibilities of confrontation. Instead, order and harmony stemmed from continuous negotiation among different parties or social groups.

Order and harmony necessitate distinctions of rank, which provides a clear structure for the balance of power. As Montesquieu's diagnosis indicated, Rome's constitutional change under the tyranny of Tarquin Superbus gave rise to the revolution that broke the balance of power. The people gradually gained more control of the legislative, juridical and executive powers, which resulted in 'the transfer of public business from the hands of the patricians into those of the plebeians'.³⁵ The concomitant of this power shifting was the protracted strife between the nobles and the plebeians. It not only signified the breakdown of social harmony but also the fact that Roman politics no longer functioned with its original distinction of ranks. Rome 'suddenly lost its liberty' as the plebeians concentrated most power in their hands without installing any 'counterbalancing mechanism'.³⁶

Montesquieu inspired Ferguson's argument that distinctions of ranks were essential to preserve liberty. If 'every subordinate rank' was destroyed, liberty was more liable to be threatened by corruption.³⁷ Ferguson claimed:

Mankind [...] have indeed by nature equal rights to their preservation, and the use of their talents, but they are fitted for different stations; and when they are classed by a rule taken from this circumstance, they suffer no injustice on the side of their natural rights. It is obvious, that some mode of subordination is as necessary to men as society itself; and this, not only to attain the ends of government, but to comply with an order established by nature.³⁸

On account of this, social inequality was sometimes inevitable, but it did not amount to injustice. True justice, according to Ferguson, was to protect people's rights through a well-functioning government.³⁹ Order, justice and rights therefore comprised an indissoluble chain under the conception of distinctions of rank.

The same conception likewise applied to the political order within the British Empire. As Ferguson further argued, it was providence that decided its members' status and thus could hardly be disputable.⁴⁰ This was the rationale behind Ferguson's attack on Price's justification of the separation of the colonies.⁴¹ Ferguson claimed,

I see no warrantable part for mankind to act under either denomination, but to acquiesce in the government which Providence has given to their kingdom or their empire, until they are sure that they do not change it for the worse; and in this, reformers upon general principle, however sanguine are far from being secure.⁴²

Ferguson reckoned, as implied in the quoted passage, that Price and other American colonists were inordinately optimistic to believe that the abstract principles regarding natural rights could outweigh providence's arrangement. The decline of Rome, again, attested to his diagnosis that the democratic 'experiment' in America would eventually lead to a military government.⁴³

Ferguson's remark on Rome's decline largely followed the Montesquieuan account.⁴⁴ He likewise developed a syllogism of national decline: the transgression of different social ranks undermined civil and political liberty; the loss of liberty resulted in political slavery and, eventually, the rise of despotic government ruined the state. The liberty of modern states was even more vulnerable given the possibility that 'the result of commercial arts' often 'lead[s] to the establishment of despotism'.⁴⁵ Ferguson also followed Montesquieu to suggest that order was the key to preserve liberty, 'and the existence of any such freedom among mankind, depends on the balance of nations'.⁴⁶ Ferguson exhibited his anti-imperial position when raising the possibility of universal liberty. It was only attainable when powerful states ceased to put inferior states under their domination. As he

argued, ‘those who are subdued are said to have lost their liberties; but from the history of mankind, to conquer, or to be conquered, has appeared, in effect, the same’.⁴⁷ This meant that imperial expansion could do no less harm to the empires than the conquered nations, given that they had been gambling their own liberty in the course of pursuing their greatness. Political balance, therefore, amounted to both domestic and international balance of power.

2. The Scottish conundrum of empire and liberty

The confrontation between imperial expansion and the preservation of liberty was widely acknowledged by eighteenth-century Scottish thinkers owing to their studies of Roman history.⁴⁸ This also became the substantial reason for Ferguson and his contemporaries to oppose British colonial policies. Yet, what made Ferguson’s position unusual was that he firmly spoke against the separation of the colonies whereas both Hume and Smith approved of it.⁴⁹ The discrepancy in their arguments signifies that the dilemma of empire and liberty has been renewed in the Scottish narrative of commercial society. For the Enlightenment luminaries, it became not so much the problem of progress and decline as barbarism and politeness. Although Roman history provided them with the ground for arguing against both ancient and modern empires, it was crucial to recognise the different causes of decline. For the republican writers in the civic humanist tradition, moral decadence was the crux. But Hume and Smith’s support for the independence of America attested that the leading opinion in eighteenth-century Britain attributed the fall of modern empires to amoral causes such as national debt or international warfare. Ferguson distinctively argued against this view. Rome’s decline convinced him that at the very end of imperial expansion awaited a military government, which could be a warning to modern states.⁵⁰

Although Hume and Smith approved of the independence of America for ‘purely pragmatic and economic’ reasons,⁵¹ the undertone of their argument was the dilemma of empire and liberty which entailed the collision between virtue and culture. The rise of commercial society rendered the dilemma a problem of barbarism and politeness. The way they conceived it was that virtue encouraged violence and conquest in ancient times whereas commerce introduced refinement and politeness to modern states. Ancient empires failed to maintain their liberty owing to the absence of such polite culture. The contrast was particularly evident in Hume’s writings. Hume accepted the republican view that moral decadence was one of the reasons that undermined Roman liberty. But he deemed the ‘republican ideal’ of government based on virtue dangerous.⁵² As he claimed, ‘every man ought to be supposed a *knave*, and to have no other end, in all his actions, than private interest’.⁵³ This rendered certain types of corruption necessary – such as parliamentary patronage – since the representatives elected by the people were not always ‘the guardians of their liberty’.⁵⁴ The best way to guarantee the public good in modern commercial states was to unite ‘the balance of power’ and ‘the balance of property’; parliamentary patronage made it possible by allocating the executive power to those with political aspirations.⁵⁵ By this account, it was commerce that resulted in the divergence between virtue and (polite) culture. Commerce led to the refinement of arts, which made ‘industry, knowledge and humanity’ an indissoluble chain.⁵⁶ It was integral to ‘the greatness of a state, and the happiness of its subjects’.⁵⁷

That said, Hume by no means rejected the possibility that a virtuous republic could maintain the liberty and security of the people. Hume was suggesting that the ancient republics whose imperial schemes were constructed around the principles of virtue ‘were violent and harsh in their politics or their manners’ owing to the absence of commerce and politeness.⁵⁸ Hume was much influenced by the Enlightenment conception of ‘Roman liberty as the virtue of a war-making society condemned to conquest, corruption and the loss of freedom itself’.⁵⁹ Rome achieved its greatness through the ‘display of virtue,’ which, as many Enlightenment luminaries understood it, was ‘the willingness to exterminate and enslave another nation, as well as to die for one’s own’.⁶⁰ Even an admirer of Rome and moralist such as Ferguson was aware of the self-destructive tendency of ancient virtue.⁶¹ From Hume’s perspective, virtue was the passion that

made the ancients less rational and less polite. But it also gave rise to civil and political liberties since virtuous citizens would endeavour to defend them.⁶² Ancient empires could therefore hardly develop civil governments, given that their guarantee of liberty resided in passions. Had the Romans managed to keep their state on a smaller scale, they might have been ‘more susceptible both of reason and order’.⁶³

It was the absence of reason and order that could threaten an empire when popular power increased. Hume deemed this phenomenon even more dangerous when mixed with the zeal of liberty. He found in the Chatham administration ‘the growth of populist, factious, and fanatical rhetoric’ that bore a great resemblance to Rome,⁶⁴ which resulted in his anti-imperial position. The Wilkes riots in 1768 enhanced Hume’s belief: ‘O! how I long to see America and the East Indies revolted totally and finally, the Revenue reduc’d to half, public Credit fully discredited by Bankruptcy, the third of London in Ruins, and the rascally Mob subu’d,’ exclaimed Hume in a letter to Gilbert Elliot.⁶⁵ This suggests that Hume was worried about the scenario where British imperial policies mingled with popular causes when he spoke for the independence of America. Such an ‘expansion of liberty and faction’ would be ‘at the expense of reason and authority’.⁶⁶ The colonial rebellion and the Wilkes riots, as Hume saw it, amounted to a return of barbarism that threatened liberty: ‘... so vile a Beast as an Englishman, who is a Man, a bad Animal too, corrupted by above a Century of Licentiousness. The Misfortune is, that this Liberty can scarcely be retrench’d without Danger of being entirely lost’.⁶⁷ Hume believed that the British government was incompetent in controlling the popular power; thus it had better abandon its imperial scheme before the entire state lost its liberty.

Hume made two practical points to oppose the British Empire: first, Rome’s historical antecedent suggested that it ‘seems to be a natural Course of Things, which brings on the Destruction of great Empires’.⁶⁸ Since the colonies distant from the imperial centre ‘bear no Affection’ to the Sovereign, local ‘disorder, violence, anarchy’ and ‘tyranny’ could easily arise.⁶⁹ Second, the American colonies had become a burden for Britain, as their management demanded lots of resources. Although maintaining the colonies enabled Britain to monopolise their trade, their independence would not drastically affect Britain’s commercial profit.⁷⁰ Rather, Britain had better abandon the colonies before they ‘totally ruin’d state of our finances’, as the British government would need to elevate its national debts in order to maintain them.⁷¹ The problem of public credit concerned Hume the most. He claimed that the British Empire had already been declining since the Walpolean administration had employed ‘two great instruments of corruption’, namely, parliamentary patronage and public credit.⁷² Smith agreed with Hume on these points and recalled the Roman lesson that a ‘conquering republic[...] brought the commonwealth to ruin’ because of its hasty in pursuing ‘power and opulence’.⁷³ The vivid memory of Rome, from Smith’s perspective, was a warning for Britain’s present state.

Smith’s elaboration in the *Wealth of Nations* demonstrated further how Scottish political discourse regarding commercial society altered the approach to the dilemma of empire and liberty. He was sceptical about the common belief that Britain should monopolise colonial trade, which largely dominated the imperial policies in the mid-eighteenth century. Moreover, there was a ‘terror’ prevailing among merchants and workers, as they believed that the separation of the American colonies would result in an ‘entire ruin of their business’ and ‘entire end of their employment’ which amounted to ‘an entire stop to their trade’.⁷⁴ It was under this pressure that the British government repealed the Stamp Act and won public support. As Smith indicated, commerce in Britain ‘has been taught to run principally in one great channel’, but the imperial scheme has rendered ‘the whole state of body politik less healthful’.⁷⁵ However, imperial expansion was inevitable for Britain to maintain the ‘one great channel’. Smith considered this an ‘unnatural proportion of the industry and commerce’, which was ‘forced to circulate’ and ‘very likely to bring on the most dangerous disorders upon the whole body politik’.⁷⁶ Smith’s argument has distinguished the causes for ancient and modern empires to pursue their greatness from one to the other, which were virtue and commerce respectively. His criticism about the monopoly of the colonial trade supported his view that

Britain should gradually abandon its imperial scheme to maintain the health of the body politic.⁷⁷ Imperial expansion and monopolisation would form a ‘necessarily hurtful’ cycle whereas the separation of the colonies would lead to a free market that benefited Britain and them.⁷⁸

For Hume and Smith, the American colonies were not worth the effort to retain.⁷⁹ As Smith indicated, ‘if any of the provinces of the British Empire cannot be made to contribute towards the support of the whole empire, it is surely time that Great Britain should free herself from the expense of defending those provinces’ and ‘of supporting their civil and military establishments’; instead, Britain should ‘endeavour to accommodate her future views and designs to the real mediocrity of her circumstances’.⁸⁰ What really mattered to Hume and Smith was how to maintain liberty through the moderation of politics.⁸¹ Considering that the British government’s attitude towards the colonies inclined to be indifferent, there was no reason not to ‘let them alone to govern or misgovern themselves as they think proper’.⁸² Hume and Smith’s support of the independence of America demonstrates that they ‘revised the Sallustian and Machiavellian explanation of declension’⁸³ and prioritised the preservation of liberty to the pursuit of national greatness.

Ferguson embraced the republican view that the greatness of a republic resulted from its liberty, but considered it a risky enterprise for the potential threat of despotism. He asserted that an empire reached ‘its greatest height’ when the people ‘had best understood the foundations of freedom’; yet, despotism often arose when the empire started to decline, where freedom ‘perished in the flames’.⁸⁴ The fear of despotism preoccupied Ferguson when he spoke against the American Revolution. But how could Ferguson share Hume and Smith’s anti-imperial position based on the concern over the loss of liberty while defending the British Empire against the American colonists? The key to this paradox consists in Ferguson’s understanding of empire.

The term ‘empire’ mostly bears negative connotations in Ferguson’s writings.⁸⁵ It often refers to ‘the rivalry between Carthage and Rome’⁸⁶ or the states that are ‘in decline or are in some sense corrupt’.⁸⁷ Ferguson’s worries about an empire’s ‘tendency of enlargement to loosen the bands of political union’ converged with Hume and Smith’s opinion.⁸⁸ This applied to both empires of military conquest and empires of colonial settlement. In Ferguson’s view, Rome’s move to extend its citizenship to the conquered nations marked a shift from the latter to the former.⁸⁹ Interestingly, Britain’s imperial image was also regarded to be undergoing a similar transformation by his time. His anti-imperial position largely stemmed from his criticism of the former. Military government that led to political slavery often arose from the distant provinces of an empire. Colonial settlement, in contrast, would not bring such danger to the state; instead, it could provide the settlers with the opportunities for maintaining their active spirit. Ferguson was aware that the boundary between the two types of empire were often blurred since modern European states constantly conflated territorial and commercial ambitions.⁹⁰ He nevertheless took the causal relation that associated corruption and militarism with imperial expansion more seriously than his contemporaries.⁹¹ The refinement of arts and the love of luxury rendered commercial empires even more likely to be threatened by corruption, which consequently led to the ‘languor’ of spirit.⁹² What distinguishes Ferguson from Hume and Smith in these remarks is that he remained committed to the moral causes of the decline of an empire while aligning with them to endorse the Montesquieuian moderation of politics.

The loss of public spirit, among other causes, had the profoundest impact. In Ferguson’s view, individualism arose from two circumstances: first, as the empire expanded, it was inevitable for the community to develop a division of labour. The specialisation of works confined people’s understanding of public and private interests, for they merely performed specific talents for their living.⁹³ Consequently, they lost the comprehensive knowledge of the whole community and stopped being concerned about public interests.⁹⁴ Second, when the empire expanded to a certain scale, the people would become remiss in their civic duty and ceased to keep a vigilant eye on the public office. Meanwhile, other neighbouring nations would not dare to challenge the empire because of its formidable power.⁹⁵ As Ferguson claimed, ‘years of tranquillity were sufficient to make even the government forget its danger’.⁹⁶

The Scottish opinion of the American Crisis attested that the dilemma of empire and liberty became increasingly problematic as the conception of commercial society came to be dominant in eighteenth-century British political discourse. While Hume and Smith considered the conundrum insoluble, Ferguson found that representative politics could be a viable way to overcome the problem.⁹⁷ We shall see this in his apology for the Britain Empire.

3. Ferguson's defence of the British Empire

3.1. *The American crisis*

Although Ferguson worried that imperial ventures would undermine liberty, his anti-imperial position was compatible with his defence of the British Empire. Ferguson's patriotism could be a solution, as he 'was fearful about what lay ahead for Britain'.⁹⁸ His studies of Roman history gave him good reasons to worry that decline could reoccur under the imperial competition among European nations at the time. Nonetheless, a more convincing case can be made from his understanding of how the republican political order preserved liberty. In what follows, we shall see his defence of the British Empire demonstrates that a mixed constitution and representative institutions are more compatible with the government of large empires, which equips modern empires with a better kind of political mechanism to safeguard their liberty.

The key difference between ancient and modern empires is that representative politics was not available to the former. Consequently, political power was gradually monopolised by military commanders as they embarked on the territorial expansion of the empires.⁹⁹ This was a fatal mistake for an empire of conquest such as the Roman Republic: the absence of representative institutions resulted in the lack of intermediate power to check and balance the ruling class' control over the government.¹⁰⁰ Ferguson made a historical comparison between the ancients and the moderns to support his view, which was consistent from the 1760s to the 90s. In ancient Rome, free citizens who were entitled to a share in political affairs accounted for only a small part of the whole community. In modern Europe 'and where the spirit of political establishments most favourable to public liberty', exclusion from 'police or election' was common; even government officials could fail to secure their voting right because of the property requirement.¹⁰¹ Without representative institutions, the government of ancient empires was less effective and hardly accountable.¹⁰² In contrast, the scale of political participation was not a problem for modern empires since representative politics was established upon a more effective institutional design that took public opinion as a whole into account. The representatives' political deliberation *per se* was a process of reconfiguring the route of power-wielding and liberty-preserving for both the rulers and the ruled.

Ferguson's conception of distinctions of rank, as we have seen in the first section, played a pivotal role in his argument. Although the distinctions based on property 'sometimes overpower both ability and every other merit, there are occasions in which it must give way to either. At elections and country meetings, men of fortune predominate; but armies are commanded, and states are governed by men of ability'.¹⁰³ Hence liberty can only be preserved by giving 'power to the wise, and safety to all'.¹⁰⁴ Maintaining order under the distinctions of ranks preoccupied Ferguson when he defended the British Empire. A Montesquieuian conception of political order was the foundation for his thinking, but Ferguson took the problem of the 'spirit of equality' more seriously than Montesquieu's original account. It was liable to destroy the distinctions of rank, without which the 'shift from *libertas* to *imperium*' could convert a free state into a despotic empire.¹⁰⁵ It has been argued that Ferguson's purpose in writing Roman history was to demonstrate how easily this change could happen and thus how vital the maintenance of hierarchical distinctions was vital to large republics.¹⁰⁶ British politics in the second half of the eighteenth century enabled Ferguson to assess the chance of such a shift and, more importantly, to come up with a solution that sought to make empire and liberty compatible.

Ferguson's conception of distinctions of rank urged him to underscore the colonies' obligation to the empire, which justified Britain's reaction to their rebellion. Indicating an analogy between the individual and the state, Ferguson claimed that 'if a person refuses the payment of his just debts, he may be compelled to do right in his habitation, no less than if he has entered with violence the house of his creditor'.¹⁰⁷ Here Ferguson rejected Hume and Smith's 'economic reason' for abandoning the colonies. He considered the worry about the public credit was 'a false alarm of bankruptcy': had the colonial affairs ruined the state treasury, we should have seen 'the people of England crowding into every avenue that leads to the Bank, and treading each other to death, with an eager haste to get forward while any cash was to be had for their paper'.¹⁰⁸ Britain was in no such condition and thus could afford military actions to maintain the imperial order.

In Ferguson's view, the American colonies had enjoyed the benefits of the British legislation for a long time. They 'arrived at this happy state under the influence of British policy' but never made contributions to the empire; even worse, they had become a huge burden as their population grew.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, considering that Britain was also under the threat of its foreign enemies during the American Crisis, the colonial rebellion only fuelled the state of disorder within the empire. Ferguson thus maintained that the colonies must fulfil their duty to 'contribute the supplies of the empire'.¹¹⁰

Sharply distinct from Hume and Smith, Ferguson's way of dealing with the 'burden' of the American colonies was not abandoning them but taking military measures. He worried if the 'quarrel' with the colonies ended up with concession, it would be 'injurious to the honor' of Britain.¹¹¹ Given that the British government always managed the colonies according to the rule of law, just as anywhere else on the British Isles, it was the colonies' provocative actions that 'open war and hostility'.¹¹² For Ferguson, going to war was nevertheless the last means of dealing with the colonial issue. His participation in the Carlisle Commission attested to his hope to solve the confrontation with peace. He even wrote a letter to the Congress when seeing the peace mission was likely to fail.¹¹³ On account of this, military measures were expedient to maintain the internal order of the British Empire.

What constitutes a free state was the key question in the debates over the American Revolution.¹¹⁴ As Price defined it, a free empire was 'a collection of states or communities united by some common bond [...]. If these states have each of them free constitutions of government, and, with respect to taxation and internal legislation, are independent of other states'.¹¹⁵ The empire was not established on a collaborative order but the right for each community within the commonwealth to live independently. On account of this, any regulation from the British government constituted the condition that 'restrain[ed] the power of self-government' and even introduced servitude to the colonies.¹¹⁶ This view brought him into direct conflict with Ferguson. Ferguson doubted that 'if Liberty be opposed to Restraint, [...] it is inconsistent with the great end of civil government itself, which is to give people security from the effect of crimes and disorders, and to preserve the peace of mankind'.¹¹⁷ Price's definition therefore was in danger of confusing natural liberty with civil liberty, as it made possible the claim that liberty, understood as the absence of restraint, eliminated the binding force of laws.

Ferguson was convinced that the Americans had been, and still were, perfectly free owing to British legislation and the representative system. The British constitution was not arbitrary, nor did it coercively subject the American colonies to the power of the British government. Conversely, it was the British statutes and charters that enabled the colonies to arrive at this 'happy state'.¹¹⁸ In other words, those legal measures signified that the liberty of the Americans was guaranteed by their self-governing state. Ferguson's view on the protective function of law was consistent; his early writing argued that

Liberty results [...] from the government of laws; and we are apt to consider statutes, not merely as the resolutions and maxims of a people determined to be free, not as the writings by which their rights are kept on record; but as a power erected to guard them, and as a barrier which the caprice of man cannot transgress.¹¹⁹

Hence statutes were ‘the key-stone[s] of civil liberty. No wiser form was ever opposed to the abuses of power’.¹²⁰ Liberty entailed the security of rights which relied on the rule of law to maintain order. It amounted to the human condition in which one was resolute in defending those rights. Price’s way of conceiving liberty could put the state in danger. Rome’s lesson, again, attested that ‘licentious and contempt of the laws’ were justified when liberty was understood as ‘freedom from every restraint’.¹²¹

For Ferguson, representative politics was the key to the liberty of the British Empire. The character of the representatives was thus crucial, as their assemblies guaranteed the function of laws and ensured that the people’s will was incorporated into the legislation. Representative politics prevented the concentration of power in a few hands, as Ferguson indicated: the ‘history of England, and of every free country, abounds with the example of statutes enacted when the people or their representatives assembled, but never executed when the crown or the executive was left alone’.¹²² On account of this, the claims that the American colonies were oppressed due to the lack of representation made no sense in Ferguson’s view. So long as the Americans adopted British laws, they were said to have consented to the British rule, since ‘Laws are everywhere acknowledged to be binding on persons who are never called upon to give their assent, either by themselves or their representatives’.¹²³ That is to say, Ferguson was aware that modern representative politics could not possibly procure each individual’s consent before embarking on its business. Alternatively, the source of legitimacy came from two indications of popular consent: the prevalence of British laws in the colonies and the convention of British legislation. The former suggested that had the Americans really objected to the way they were represented in Westminster, they should have expressed their dissent by rejecting the British laws. The very act of dissent was ‘more than withhold [ing one’s] agreement’ – it was a declaration of one’s ‘repugnance’.¹²⁴ This fed into the second indication through the fact that the Americans not only accepted the British laws but also took them as the ground of their establishment. ‘Matters therefore were in their ordinary train’, which made their representation the same as elsewhere in the British Empire. The Americans likewise had the right to request for the security of their property through their representatives as others living on the British Isles did.¹²⁵

3.2. The role of political representation and its limitations

Regardless of their attitudes towards the American Revolution, the republicans across the Atlantic shared the problem of political participation in modern states because of the growing population. It was commonly believed that small republics ‘and to those especially in which the sovereignty was exercised by the collective body of the people’, such as Athens and Rome, could best maintain their liberty.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, Ferguson claimed that liberty was possible for modern European states precisely because ‘the practice of representation’ was ‘happily introduced’, which ‘enabled every order of the state [...] to take a part in the legislature of their country, and to have a vigilant eye on the proceedings of the whole’.¹²⁷ Political representation therefore eliminated the peril of mob rule while enabling people to live according to their own will.¹²⁸

Ferguson’s admiration for the representative system was established on historical analysis no less than philosophical inquiry. In addition to the aforementioned claim that England and other free nations had been effectively practicing the rule of law via political representation, Ferguson also attributed civil liberty to representative politics. It maintained the separation of power in a mixed constitution while allowing people to exercise their political judgement.¹²⁹ This political ‘division of labour’ was also fit for Ferguson’s conception of the distinctions of rank: it enabled people with different talents to serve the community in the right place. The collaborative process of the citizenry and the ruling class made human perfectibility possible, as Britain ‘has carried the authority and government of law to a point of perfection, which they never before attained in the history of mankind’.¹³⁰

Political representation, in Ferguson's opinion, was a product of historical progress and hence a preferable political mechanism. The evolution of political establishments in Europe was a continuous competition of power between sovereigns and vassals. When the monarchs succeeded in augmenting the prerogative power, 'they paved the way for despotism in the state'.¹³¹ According to Ferguson, many European monarchies in his time had taken the path of despotism; those absolute princes accumulated their power in the name of protecting the people from the exploitation of aristocrats and 'encouraged the practice of commercial and lucrative arts'.¹³² On the other hand, the states that adopted representative systems 'formed a new power to restrain the prerogative, to establish the government of law, and to exhibit a spectacle new in the history of mankind'.¹³³ This practice suggested that political representation was fundamental to a mixed constitution, as it maintained the balanced power among different ranks and showed that monarchy and republic were reconcilable. Moreover, it made civil liberty possible, as the people 'could avail themselves of the wealth they acquired, and of the sense of their personal importance'.¹³⁴ The people were said to have an 'actual share of the legislature [...] while they continue to enjoy their freedom'.¹³⁵ Meanwhile, the legislature was able to improve the laws by learning from precedents and removing 'every possible ground of dispute'.¹³⁶ A government with representatives would therefore be more efficient and 'more lasting than any of those in which the people possessing or pretending to the entire legislature'.¹³⁷

Despite the fact that Ferguson greatly valued the advantages of the representative system, he was fully aware of its potential problems and limitations: 'who may be safely entrusted with legislative power' and to what extent could the representative system cover the interests of different social groups, especially those without the right to vote?¹³⁸ Ferguson did not deny that representatives could be chosen either by elections or drawing lots. Yet, his main concern was whether candidates possessed the virtue that could urge them to lay themselves down for the whole community. By 'virtue', Ferguson meant not only the political talents of maintaining the state but also the moral qualities of a citizen.¹³⁹ He asserted that the necessary condition for ideal representation was that the representative

ought to feel himself in the exercise of a trust committed to him by the confidence and goodwill of his fellow-citizens, and be led to act from affection in return for their esteem. This [...] is the true state of a man and a citizen acting for the welfare of his country.¹⁴⁰

Ferguson maintained that ideal representation did not consist in abstract principles or 'something that has never been realized in the history of mankind'.¹⁴¹ Instead, the representatives needed to have the capacity of sympathising with their constituents:

What renders this expedient, of trusting the interests of many to a few, a sufficient security to the people who rely on it, is that their representative, by being a person of the same mind and interest with themselves, and himself included in every act of legislation, is likely to precede as his constituents would do in his place [...] human nature does not seem [...] to admit of any greater security to liberty than this.¹⁴²

Political talents, moral qualities and sympathy thus constituted the foundation of Ferguson's idea of virtue, which enabled him to assert that modern commercial states could prevent corruption and preserve liberty by 'making virtue an object of state'.¹⁴³

From this standpoint, political virtue was the bond that constituted the trust between the constituents and their representatives and, more broadly, the colonies and their metropolitan state. The emphasis on trust and the representatives' good character explains why Ferguson did not consider individual consent as the foundation of modern representative politics, as we have seen in the earlier discussion. The very act of entrusting the representatives denotes one's willingness to be represented, which means such an expression of the will enables them to retain their liberty when being subject to laws.

This puts Ferguson closer to Edmund Burke's position on the role of trust in British imperial politics.¹⁴⁴ They both shared a default view that Britain was a free empire whose liberty arose

from and was safeguarded by the constitution. As Burke argued, all parts of the British Empire ‘must be governed according to the opinion of a free land. Without subordination, it would not be one Empire. Without freedom, it would not be the British Empire’.¹⁴⁵ What might turn the subordination into an involuntary deprivation of freedom was the breach of trust that dissolved the bond between the representatives and the represented. Such a bond relied on the government’s obligation to act in good faith when exercising its authority. This was the point that differentiated Burke from Ferguson. As we have seen, Ferguson understood it the other way round: obligation was the duty of the colonies to contribute to the empire as a whole. But as Burke understood it, ‘an Empire is the aggregate of many States’ that ‘have many local privileges’.¹⁴⁶ Local privileges were often closely knitted with local manners and morals, both of which should be incorporated into the foundation of legislation.¹⁴⁷ In other words, the relation between obligation and trust was ‘an affair of sentiments and of interest’ that sustained the society and determined the stability of the imperial rule.¹⁴⁸ In the American case, the British government’s failure to address its obligation resulted in the distrust between the Parliament and the colonies, which provoked the rebellion.¹⁴⁹ The breach of trust, in the eyes of the American colonists and thinkers such as Price, was a clear sign of arbitrary power.

However, Ferguson’s understanding of obligation did not bind the ideas of trust with consent-based allegiance to government. Ferguson maintained that the same degree of obedience applied to all as long as people were protected by and benefitted from the laws. As he argued with a strong allusion to the American Crisis:

If anyone plead that, being excluded from a vote at elections, he is not bound by the laws to which the people assent by representation, his plea may be admitted, and he is at liberty to withdraw from the influence of these laws: But, while he remains within the precincts to which they extend, and continues to take the benefit of them, he is not at liberty to *counteract* or to *disturb the order of things established*.¹⁵⁰

Here Ferguson intended to indicate that the reciprocity of legal benefit and protection between the government and the people amounted to a form of tacit consent, whose concomitant was the allegiance to the present political establishment. Hence even if one could argue that *in theory* the binding force of laws dissolved alongside the lack of representation, they could not deny that their duty to comply with the laws remained intact as long as they retained the benefit and protection under the same jurisdiction. This was certainly the case of the American colonies – they could not deny that they had been benefiting from the protection of the British laws. It follows that they could not argue that they were ill-represented since their acceptance of the laws meant they were happy with the benefit. In Ferguson’s view, the colonists simply confused theory with practice.

3.3. The Anglo-Irish union and the balance of power in Europe

Ferguson’s thoughts on Ireland are surprisingly less appreciated by commentators.¹⁵¹ It is noteworthy that from the 1770s to the 90s, Ireland and America were the subjects he almost always discussed together in his correspondence. His interest in Ireland could have arisen as early as in the 1750s when he served as the chaplain of the Black Watch regiment, a Highland battalion stationed in Ireland where Ferguson spent about eight years of his youth.¹⁵² He began to advocate the union with Ireland avidly after the American Revolution. One could argue that his support of the British Empire once again contradicted his anti-imperial position, but his thoughts were actually quite consistent. As we have seen in the American case, his anti-imperial position mostly operated on theoretical ground to help him identify the potential problems of the British imperial scheme. It has also been argued that Fletcherian republicanism was another source of inspiration for him to analyse the ‘weakness of the post-Napoleonic European order’.¹⁵³ In other words, Ferguson’s diagnosis of ancient and modern empires aimed to enhance Britain’s political strength in order to achieve a balance of power in Europe.¹⁵⁴ His solution to the republican dilemma had put him in a favourable position as it lessened the concerns over imperial expansion. Maintaining the balance of power, in this context, was more than a theoretical commitment to Montesquieu’s thought – it intended

to practically prevent a scenario where other European states would ‘start fighting England’s global commercial imperialism’.¹⁵⁵

Political representation, in Ferguson’s opinion, was a practical and highly feasible instrument of union. Even after the British setback in the American War of Independence, Ferguson still insisted on his view that representation could solve the problem of the colonies. He envisaged a dedicated ‘General Parliament for America’ before the delegation of the Carlisle Commission departed in 1778.¹⁵⁶ Given that a small republic was no longer politically viable, separate legislatures could be useful for maintaining the empire in theory. Yet, Ferguson’s commitment to the union led to another tension between separate legislatures and the British Empire as a whole. As he suggested in the same letter of 1778, Britain should signal to the Americans that their metropolitan state had no intention ‘to Invade their Libertys but of a Resolution to Support the Authority of the State’.¹⁵⁷ Hence the real question for him was: what degree of devolution could the British government accept in order to strike a balance between liberty and authority within the empire?

This was indeed the thinking behind Ferguson’s support of the union with Ireland. The American Revolution had given the British government a lesson that the liberty of the subordinate nations was the strongest political rhetoric for rebelling against the imperial rule. In light of this, Ferguson took a rather complicated position on the Irish question. It reflected his theoretical commitment to the republican tradition while struggling to advocate the union. The Carlisle Commission enabled him to be acquainted with William Eden, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, and Frederick Howard, the fifth Earl of Carlisle and the Lord Lieutenant for Ireland – both were in office from 1780 to 1782. Ferguson’s student Henry Dundas, Pitt the Younger’s ‘closest political confidant’, was deeply involved in the union campaign in the 1790s.¹⁵⁸ These connections not only gave Ferguson some direct sources of information but also made his opinion more relevant. In his view, granting the Irish the rights to free trade and legislative autonomy were the friendly – and even necessary – gestures for the liberty of the Irish people. Yet, the challenge was how to square this message with the pressing need for an union. He wrote to Eden in 1780 that his predilection was ‘in favour of Small States and Separate Legislatures’ in theory, but, in reality, the Anglo-Irish union was essential for Britain’s safety.¹⁵⁹ This is a crucial indication that Ferguson’s anti-imperial position remained a part of the underlying thoughts, but the political reality discouraged him to advance it. As McDaniel argues, Ferguson retained some ‘theoretical sympathy for the Fletcherian [republican] ideal’, but Britain’s rivalry with France ‘now made an Anglo-Irish union necessary for Britain’s national security’.¹⁶⁰

Ferguson’s letter also shows that he was aware of Eden’s hesitation to support the union and free trade in his earlier letter to Carlisle.¹⁶¹ Eden’s concerns stemmed from a stream of public opinion that drew a parallel between Scotland and Ireland. It argued that the Anglo-Scottish union in 1707 was a huge success and hence the union with Ireland would be ‘the cure of all their ills’.¹⁶² Although Eden himself approved of the union, he worried that ‘popular impatience and precipitation’ would ruin the plan.¹⁶³ Sharply distinct from Ferguson, who considered the union should have happened twenty years earlier,¹⁶⁴ Eden believed that the commensurability in commerce and politics between the two nations could be harmful to Ireland. What the British government should do now was to assist Ireland to catch up with British prosperity, otherwise ‘when the liberty of commerce is unequally enjoyed, one part of the empire may be in danger of becoming a burden to the other’.¹⁶⁵

The British government’s disappointing plan for free trade resulted in public protests in Dublin and widespread anti-British movements in 1779.¹⁶⁶ A month before the events, Ferguson confessed in a letter that the Scottish people were alarmed by the situation in Ireland, and thought the government should take ‘the utmost precaution [...] to prevent the Flame in that Country’.¹⁶⁷ But he was, surprisingly, on the Irish side throughout the period: ‘I honour the Irish Patriots of our time they have shown that the Effort they have made is a virtuous one for the Relief & Prosperity of their Country in which I wish them every Possible Degree of Success’.¹⁶⁸ This is not to say that Ferguson approved of their anti-British cause. He was very explicit that ‘the Object I confess for which I pant is a compleat Union with Ireland’.¹⁶⁹ Instead, his attitude reflects a substantial concern for British

politics at the time – Britain could lose another colony if the government failed to address the Irish issue. From the Irish perspective, pressing for a union now would provoke mass resistance.¹⁷⁰ As Edmund Burke emphatically articulated it, the North administration ‘had already lost us one part of our empire, and was now likely to drive another into rebellion’.¹⁷¹ These reactions could explain Eden’s earlier hesitation to speak for the union. In contrast, Ferguson exhibited a different consideration on this issue – what worried him the most was the threat posed by Britain’s European rivals. The union with Ireland would ‘give us all our Boats/ abroad to make us tight for any Storm that may Assail us’.¹⁷²

Ferguson’s support of Ireland paved the way for him to further defend the British Empire. The challenge for him in the Irish question was how to make representative politics more flexible to address the problem of the subordinate nations’ liberty, which was a lesson learnt from the American Revolution. Granting free trade and legislative autonomy to Ireland was a strategic move to avoid the possible scenario of resistance. More importantly, it signified the political gesture of balancing liberty and authority under British imperial rule. A stable union would give Britain the political strength to maintain the balance of power in Europe.

Conclusion

Ferguson’s solution to the republican dilemma of empire and liberty demonstrates the most insightful aspect of his republicanism and his commitment to the Montesquieuan project of political balance. The decline of Rome convinced many eighteenth-century thinkers that the two elements were incompatible. Scottish Enlightenment luminaries raised the new conundrum of (modern) empire and liberty by re-examining the age-old dilemma in the context of commercial society. They now conceived it as the clash between barbarism and polite culture – the absence of the latter in ancient times eventually rendered the free empire unattainable.

The British debate over the American Revolution is a telling case of the conundrum of empire and liberty. Hume and Smith both argued that Britain should give up the colonies for economic reasons. They also worried about the growth of popular power, which could undermine Britain’s liberty if popular causes orientated its imperial policies. Ferguson’s most distinctive contribution to the debate consisted in his defence of the British Empire, although it seems self-contradictory for him to share the anti-imperial position with Hume and Smith.

Ferguson’s positions are actually compatible. As this article intends to show, his chief aim was to consolidate Britain’s place in Europe. To achieve this goal, Ferguson needed to identify possible threats to Britain’s national progress and find viable ways to maintain the state. Ferguson’s historical approach in the first instance gave rise to his anti-imperial position. Political events at the time then became his source of inspiration. His contribution to the debates over the American Revolution effectively offered a solution to the republican dilemma. Political representation – the core of his solution – was the ground for his defence of the British Empire. He also argued that the union with Ireland was indispensable to strengthen Britain’s power. The loss of the American colonies, for Ferguson, was an important lesson for all to re-evaluate the Anglo-Irish relationship. The British government should endeavour to balance liberty and authority by exhibiting some flexibility in its representative politics. Adjusting its commercial and legislative policies would help the two nations progress towards the union in a relatively amicable way. Only then could the British Empire maintain its internal order and the balance of power in Europe.

Notes

1. J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, 1975), 499; Dorota Pietrzyk-Reeves, ‘Adam Ferguson’s Republicanism’, *Politeja* 10, no. 1 (2008): 67–84; Alexander Broadie, *Agreeable Connexions: Scottish Enlightenment Links with France* (Edinburgh, 2012), ch. 6; idem, ‘Adam Ferguson, Classical Republicanism and the Imperative of Modernity’, in *MacCormick’s Scotland*, ed. Neil Walker (Edinburgh, 2012), 107–27;

- Marco Geuna, 'Republicanism and Commercial Society in the Scottish Enlightenment: the Case of Adam Ferguson', in *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, Vol. 2, eds. Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge, 2002), 177–96.
2. The most noteworthy challenges to this reading come from Iain McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Roman Past and Europe's Future* (Cambridge MA, 2013); and Max Skjönsberg, 'Adam Ferguson on the Perils of Popular Factions and Demagogues in a Roman Mirror', *History of European Ideas* 45, no. 6 (2019): 842–65. Some have proposed to remove Ferguson from the republican tradition or regard him as a prototype of liberal. See Craig Smith, *Adam Ferguson and the Idea of Civil Society* (Edinburgh, 2019), 11–13; Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson, *Liberal Beginnings: Making a Republic for the Moderns* (Cambridge, 2008), 51–87.
 3. David Armitage, 'Empire and Liberty: A Republican Dilemma', in *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, Vol. 2, 29; J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, Vol. 3: *The First Decline and Fall* (Cambridge, 2003), 373.
 4. For Montesquieu's importance to Ferguson, see Max Skjönsberg, 'Adam Ferguson on Partisanship, Party Conflict, and Popular Participation', *Modern Intellectual History* 16, no. 1 (2019): 10–21 and 'Adam Ferguson on the Perils of Popular Factions and Demagogues in a Roman Mirror'; McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ch. 1.
 5. McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 40, 142–54.
 6. Richard Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1985), 398; Lisa Hill, *The Passionate Society: The Social, Political and Moral Thought of Adam Ferguson* (Dordrecht, 2006), 161–214; Geuna, 'Republicanism and Commercial Society', 183. Nonetheless, McDaniel has indicated the discrepancies between ancient republicanism and Ferguson's version, which fundamentally refutes the misconstrued view above. See *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 156.
 7. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 3:374.
 8. For detailed analyses of the Ferguson-Price debate, see Skjönsberg, 'Adam Ferguson on Partisanship, Party Conflict, and Popular Participation', 12–6; Ronald Hamowy, 'Scottish Thought and the American Revolution: Adam Ferguson's Response to Richard Price', in *Liberty and American Experience in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. David Womersley (Indianapolis, 2006), 348–87.
 9. Yiftah Elazar, 'Adam Ferguson on Modern Liberty and the Absurdity of Democracy', *History of Political Thought* 35, no. 4 (2014): 787.
 10. Iain McDaniel, 'Unsocial Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment: Ferguson and Kames on War, Sociability and the Foundations of Patriotism', *History of European Ideas* 41, no. 5 (2015): 662–82; Jack A. Hill, 'Adam Ferguson's Discourse on 'Rude Nations' in the *Essay* and the Critique of Despotism', *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies* 38, no. 1 (2018): 104–20; Smith, *Adam Ferguson and the Idea of Civil Society*, 179–81.
 11. David Kettler, 'Political Education for Empire and Revolution', in *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature*, eds. Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle (London, 2008), 88. Ferguson had direct involvement in the War of Independence as he participated in the Carlisle Commission, which the British Prime Minister, Lord North, sent to the Continental Congress in 1778. Led by the Fifth Earl of Carlisle, the British delegation sought to make peace settlement but eventually failed. See Yasuo Amoh et al. eds., *Adam Ferguson and the American Revolution: Proceedings of the British Commissioners at Philadelphia, 1778–79* (Tokyo, 2015).
 12. McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 142.
 13. Skjönsberg, 'Adam Ferguson on the Perils of Popular Factions and Demagogues in a Roman Mirror', 858–9.
 14. McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 142.
 15. Skjönsberg, 'Adam Ferguson on the Perils of Popular Factions and Demagogues in a Roman Mirror', 858.
 16. Hamowy, 'Scottish Thought and the American Revolution', 353.
 17. Skjönsberg, 'Adam Ferguson on the Perils of Popular Factions and Demagogues in a Roman Mirror', 860.
 18. Jane B. Fagg, 'Introduction', in *The Correspondence of Adam Ferguson, 2 volumes*, ed. Vincenzo Merolle (London, 1995), 1:lxii–lxiii.
 19. Armitage, 'Empire and Liberty', 29; Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 3:208.
 20. *Ibid.*, 203; Armitage, 'Empire and Liberty', 30–1; Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, 61–4.
 21. Armitage, 'Empire and Liberty', 29–42; Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford, 1997), 35–41; idem, *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge, 2012), 17.
 22. McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 14–8.
 23. Charles Louis Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline* (1734), ed. David Lowenthal (Ithaca, 1965), 92.
 24. *Ibid.*, 92–3. Also idem, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), ed. Anne Cohler, Basia Miller and Harold Stone (Cambridge, 1989), 143–4.
 25. *Ibid.*; McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 22–3.
 26. *Ibid.*, 91.

27. Ibid.
28. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 29.
29. Ibid., 28.
30. Montesquieu, *Considerations*, 92. Adam Smith's advice for Britain during the American Revolution echoes this view, which we shall come to in the next section.
31. Ibid., 95.
32. Ibid., 93.
33. Ibid., 94.
34. Ibid. Cf. Adam Ferguson, *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic*, 5 volumes (Edinburgh, 1799), 2: 59–60, 132–4. All the spellings and emphases are from the original texts.
35. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 172, 176–84.
36. Ibid., 175; McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 23–4.
37. Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge, 1995), 71; Hill, 'Adam Ferguson's Discourse', 114.
38. Ferguson, *Essay*, 63–4.
39. Ferguson applied this view to his comment on the French Revolution. See *The Manuscripts of Adam Ferguson*, ed. Vincenzo Merolle (London, 2006), 133–4.
40. Ferguson, *Essay*, 63–4; Adam Ferguson, *The Morality of Stage-Plays Seriously Considered* (Edinburgh, 1757), 24.
41. Adam Ferguson, *Remarks on a Pamphlet Lately Published by Dr Price* (London, 1776), 22.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 23, 42–3.
44. For Ferguson's treatment of Roman history, especially his preference for the patricians, see Skjönsberg, 'Adam Ferguson on the Perils of Popular Factions and Demagogues in a Roman Mirror', 851–8; McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ch. 5.
45. Ferguson, *Essay*, 256–7; cf. *Roman Republic*, 1: 12–3, 275–7.
46. Ibid. This might seem to be incompatible with the conventional interpretation that Ferguson encouraged political conflicts to maintain the dynamics of a society. Yet, as Skjönsberg's reading suggests, Ferguson actually hesitated to promote this view since he was worried about the negative impact of popular power ('Adam Ferguson on Partisanship, Party Conflict, and Popular Participation', 1–28). In my opinion, this explains why Ferguson put more emphasis on Montesquieuan conceptions of harmony and order in his works.
47. Ferguson, *Essay*, 256–7.
48. Armitage, 'Empire and Liberty', 44.
49. Cf. James Harris, *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge, 2015), 433–8; Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, 2005), 36–45.
50. As McDaniel has argued, Ferguson took Rome as a 'mirror' of Britain as well as Europe's future. See *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ch. 2; idem, 'Ferguson, Roman History and the Threat of Military Government in Modern Europe', in *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature*, 115–30. However, it seems to me still unclear in these studies that what exactly would ensue after a military or even despotic government has arisen according to Ferguson's logic of historical progress.
51. Harris, *Hume*, 436.
52. J. G. A. Pocock, 'Hume and the American Revolution', in *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History* (Cambridge, 1985), 132.
53. Hume, *Essays*, 42. Hume's emphasis.
54. Ibid., 35.
55. Ibid.; Pocock, 'Hume and the American Revolution', 132.
56. Hume, *Essays*, 271.
57. Ibid., 255.
58. Ibid., 93–5, 259; Pocock, 'Hume and the American Revolution', 131.
59. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 3:374.
60. Ibid., 383.
61. Ibid., 408.
62. Hume, *Essays*, 259.
63. Ibid., 36.
64. David Hume, *Letters of David Hume*, 2 volumes, ed. J. Y. T Greig (Oxford, 1932), 2:300–1; Pocock, 'Hume and the America Revolution', 137.
65. Hume, *Letters*, 2:184.
66. Pocock, 'Hume and the America Revolution', 137.
67. Hume, *Letters*, 2:216.
68. Hume, *Essays*, 341.
69. Ibid; Hume, *Letters*, 2:510.

70. Hume expressed this view in a letter to Smith (*Letters*, 2:308). Commerce was the main issue that occupied the Scottish public opinion during the American Crisis, as Scottish merchants had formed a close commercial relationship with America through tobacco trade. Thus, the Scottish public feared that the Revolution would hit their economy. Dalphy I. Fagerstrom, 'Scottish Opinion and the American Revolution', *William and Mary Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (1954): 273.
71. Hume, *Letters*, 2:300–1; Hume claimed that '... from 1740 to 1761, during the Course of no more than 21 Years ... the Nation ran in Debt about a hundred Millions' (*Letters*, 2:237). Cf. Harris, *Hume*, 435–7.
72. Pocock, 'Hume and the American Revolution', 129.
73. Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (1763), eds. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael and P. G. Stein (Indianapolis, 1978), 233–40; idem, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 2 volumes (1776), eds. R. H. Campbell, A. S. Skinner and W. B. Todd (Indianapolis, 1981), 2:624. Cf. Armitage, 'Empire and Liberty', 44–5.
74. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 2:605.
75. *Ibid.*, 2:604.
76. *Ibid.*, 2:604–5.
77. *Ibid.*, 2:606.
78. *Ibid.*, 2:607–8.
79. Pocock, 'Hume and the American Revolution', 138.
80. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 2:947. Smith developed this point further in an unpublished memoir. See G. H. Guttridge, 'Adam Smith on the American Revolution: An Unpublished Memorial', *The American Historical Review* 38, no. 4 (1933): 714–20. Cf. Donald Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics* (Cambridge, 1978), 154.
81. It is nevertheless important to recognise that although Smith endorsed Montesquieuan moderation, he did not fully accept Montesquieu's account of Rome and Britain. McDaniel also argues that Smith 'implicitly criticized' Ferguson and those who deemed military government or despotic empire possible for Britain's future. See *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 50.
82. Hume, *Letters*, 2:303.
83. Armitage, 'Empire and Liberty', 45.
84. Ferguson, *Essay*, 107.
85. Hill, 'Adam Ferguson's Discourse', 110.
86. Ferguson, *Essay*, 197.
87. *Ibid.*, 60, 108–10, 148–9; Hill indicates that Ferguson distinguishes 'empire' from 'great nations', which does not have negative connotations (Hill, 'Adam Ferguson's Discourse', 111). Cf. Kettler, 'Political Education for Empire and Revolution', 90–3, 97–102, 113.
88. Ferguson, *Essay*, 208, 262.
89. Ferguson, *Roman Republic*, 1:385–7, 2: 132–4.
90. Ferguson, *Essay*, 132. For the changing image of the British Empire, see David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2000), 170–98. McDaniel indicates that some of Ferguson's contemporaries regarded his *Essay* as a commentary on this phenomenon. McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 105–6.
91. Smith, *Adam Ferguson and the Idea of Civil Society*, 167, 208; Christopher Berry, *The Idea of Luxury* (Cambridge, 1994), 126–76; idem, *The Idea of Commercial Society in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 2013), 156–72.
92. Ferguson, *Essay*, 204–8.
93. William Lehmann, *Adam Ferguson and the Beginnings of Modern Sociology* (New York, 1930), 151.
94. Ferguson, *Essay*, 207.
95. Ferguson, *Manuscripts*, 138–9.
96. Ferguson, *Essay*, 207.
97. Smith also had considered political representation to be the solution to the American problem. He believed that the Americans had been and should be represented in Parliament, and 'the seat of the empire' would naturally shift once their population and economy surpassed Britain (*Wealth of Nations*, 2:625–6). However, Smith seemed to change his mind two years later, as he claimed that 'the plan of a constitutional union with our colonies and of an American representation seems not to be agreeable to any considerable party of men in Great Britain' (Guttridge, 'Adam Smith on the American Revolution: An Unpublished Memorial', 717).
98. Hill, 'Adam Ferguson's Discourse', 111.
99. Ferguson, *Roman Republic*, 1:3.
100. As McDaniel rightly observes, Ferguson's argument closely follows Montesquieu's analysis of Rome's decline. See, for instance, Ferguson, *Roman Republic*, 5:129 and Montesquieu, *Considerations*, 91–2; McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 141–2.
101. Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science*, 2 volumes (Edinburgh, 1792), 2:472–3.
102. McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 142. Cf. Ferguson, *Roman Republic*, 1:386.
103. Ferguson, *Principles*, 2:473.

104. Ferguson, *Remarks*, 9.
105. McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 62, 93.
106. *Ibid.*, 132.
107. Ferguson, *Remarks*, 50–1.
108. *Ibid.*, 48.
109. *Ibid.*, 44–9, 54. Cf. Richard Price, *Two Tracts on Civil Liberty* (1778), in *Price: Political Writings*, ed. D. O. Thomas (Cambridge, 1992), 33–46.
110. Ferguson, *Remarks*, 31.
111. *Ibid.*, 47.
112. *Ibid.*, 50.
113. Adam Ferguson, ‘To the President and other Members of the Congress’, in Ferguson, *Correspondence*, 2:552–5; ‘Memorial respecting the measures to be pursued on the present immediate prospect of a final separation of American Colonys from Great Britain’, in Ferguson, *Correspondence*, 2:556–60.
114. As McDaniel observes, ‘what distinguished Ferguson’s own analysis from that of most of his Scottish contemporaries ... was his careful dissection of the concept of liberty’. *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 189–90. Cf. Skjönsberg, ‘Adam Ferguson on Partisanship, Party Conflict, and Popular Participation’, 12.
115. Price, *Two Tracts on Civil Liberty*, 34–5.
116. *Ibid.*, 23.
117. Ferguson, *Remarks*, 3.
118. *Ibid.*, 26, 29, 33, 36–7, 44, 51.
119. Ferguson, *Essay*, 249.
120. *Ibid.*, 160.
121. Ferguson, *Roman Republic*, 1:368.
122. Ferguson, *Essay*, 160.
123. Ferguson, *Principles*, 2:470.
124. *Ibid.*, 469.
125. Ferguson, *Remarks*, 24.
126. Ferguson, *Principles*, 468.
127. *Ibid.*
128. For Ferguson’s objection to expanding franchise and participatory democracy, see Skjönsberg, ‘Adam Ferguson on the Perils of Popular Factions and Demagogues in a Roman Mirror’, 858–9.
129. Ferguson, *Essay*, 159–60. Skjönsberg rightly argues that Ferguson preferred British constitution to that of Rome ‘thanks to the modern notion of representation.’ See ‘Adam Ferguson on the Perils of Popular Factions and Demagogues in a Roman Mirror’, 859.
130. Ferguson, *Essay*, 159.
131. *Ibid.*, 128.
132. *Ibid.*
133. *Ibid.*
134. *Ibid.*
135. *Ibid.*, 159.
136. *Ibid.*
137. *Ibid.*, 158.
138. Ferguson, *Principles*, 2:471.
139. As McDaniel indicates, this is why the view ‘that neither legal nor constitutional arrangements were, in themselves, sufficient guarantees of liberty’ distinguished Ferguson from Montesquieu, Hume and Smith. *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 57. Cf. Skjönsberg, ‘Adam Ferguson on the Perils of Popular Factions and Demagogues in a Roman Mirror’, 859–60.
140. Ferguson, *Principles*, 2:469.
141. *Ibid.*, 2:470.
142. *Ibid.*, 468.
143. Ferguson, *Essay*, 155.
144. For Burke’s view, see Richard Bourke, ‘Liberty, Authority, and Trust in Burke’s Idea of Empire’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, no. 3 (2000): 453–71.
145. Edmund Burke, ‘Speech on Declaratory Resolution, 3 February 1766’, in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. 2: Party, Parliament, and the American War: 1766–1774*, eds. Paul Langford and William B. Todd (Oxford, 1981), 50.
146. Edmund Burke, ‘Speech on Conciliation with America, 22 March 1775’, in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. 3: Party, Parliament, and the American War: 1774–1780*, eds. Warren M. Elofson, John A. Woods, and William B. Todd (Oxford, 1996), 132.
147. Edmund Burke, ‘Thoughts on the Present Discontents 1770’, in *Writings and Speeches, Vol. 2*, 257–8.
148. Bourke, ‘Liberty, Authority, and Trust in Burke’s Idea of Empire’, 462.

149. Burke made a parallel account between the American Colonies and India in ‘Speech on Fox’s India Bill, 1 December 1783’, in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol.5: India: Madras and Bengal: 1774–1785*, eds. P. J. Marshall and William B. Todd (Oxford, 1996), 381.
150. Ferguson, *Principles*, 2:473–4.
151. Alvin Jackson nevertheless noted that many Scots, including Ferguson, support the Anglo-Irish union because of their concerns over the political and commercial challenge faced by the British Empire. See *Two Unions: Ireland, Scotland, and the Survival of the United Kingdom, 1707–2007* (Oxford, 2011), 71. For the Anglo-Irish union’s connections with Scottish thought, see James Stafford, ‘The Scottish Enlightenment and the British-Irish Union of 1801’, in *Four Nations Approaches to Modern ‘British’ History: A (Dis)United Kingdom*, eds. Naomi Lloyd-Jones and Margaret M. Scull (London, 2018), 111–34.
152. Fagg, ‘Introduction’, xxv–i.
153. Anna Plassart, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2015), 151.
154. Ferguson, *Manuscripts*, 139.
155. Plassart, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the French Revolution*, 152.
156. Ferguson, *Correspondence*, 1:167.
157. *Ibid.*
158. James Kelly, ‘The Origins of the Act of Union: An Examination of Unionist Opinion in Britain and Ireland, 1650–1800’, *Irish Historical Review* 25, no. 99 (1987): 259–60; Alexander Murdoch, ‘Henry Dundas, Scotland and the Union with Ireland, 1792–1801’ in *Scotland in the Age of the French Revolution*, ed. Bob Harris (Edinburgh, 2005), 125–39.
159. Ferguson, *Correspondence*, 1:230.
160. McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 114.
161. William Eden, *A Letter to the Earl of Carlisle ... on the Representation of Ireland, respecting a Free Trade* (Dublin, 1779), esp. 17–9, 28.
162. *Ibid.*, 26.
163. *Ibid.*, 28.
164. Ferguson, *Correspondence*, 1:223.
165. Eden, *A Letter to the Earl of Carlisle*, 19, 23–4.
166. Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: the Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, 2015), 400; Richard Whatmore, *Terrorists, Anarchists, and Republicans: The Genevans and the Irish in Time of Revolution* (Princeton, 2019), 177; Ultán Gillen, ‘Ascendancy Ireland, 1660–1800’, in *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland*, eds. Richard Bourke and Ian McBride (Princeton, 2016), 64–5.
167. Ferguson, *Correspondence*, 1:221.
168. *Ibid.*, 1:231.
169. *Ibid.*, 1:223.
170. James Kelly, ‘Public and Political Opinion in Ireland and the Idea of an Anglo-Irish Union, 1650–1800’, in *Political Discourse in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, eds. D. George Boyce, Robert Eccleshall and Vincent Geoghegan (London, 2001), 127.
171. Edmund Burke, ‘Speech on Irish Trade and the State of Ireland, 12 March 1779’, in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. 9: I: The Revolutionary War, 1794–1797; II: Ireland*, eds. R. B. McDowell and William B. Todd (Oxford, 1991), 530. See also Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 400–1.
172. Ferguson, *Correspondence*, 1:223, 231.

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