

PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY OF ADAM FERGUSON AND IMMANUEL KANT

Sandra ZÁKUTNÁ¹

Kant's philosophy of history concentrated in his short political writings is an important part of his philosophical legacy. His approach to political themes was influenced not only by political situation and events of his present, e.g. American or French Revolution, but also by other philosophers of his era. Well-known is his philosophical dialogue with Jean Jacques Rousseau who influenced him in answering his fourth question "What is man?". Another important source of ideas which shaped Kant's position in the matter of philosophy of history were definitively Scottish philosophers, especially David Hume, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. According to Norbert Waszek the major continental impact of Scottish Enlightenment thought was in German-speaking countries (2006, p. 55). In the article *The Scottish Enlightenment in Germany and its Translator, Christian Garve (1742-98)* Waszek provides interesting information about the facts how books of Scottish authors, and translations of these books, formed Kant, Lessing, Schiller, or Hegel. He also quotes Goethe to illustrate the influence of Scottish thought on Germany: "We Germans who aspire to the most universal culture have for many years been aware of the merits of the respectable Scots" (Goethe in Waszek 2006, p. 55).²

In this article I will try to focus on the issue of progress in history represented by formation and development of civil society, the role of people and people as citizens in it, the question of conflict as the main driving impulse, and the portrayal of possible future in the works of Adam Ferguson and Immanuel Kant. Civil society and the nature of political society were key topics in 18th century philosophical debates together with themes concerning patterns of progress of societies, types of governments, international relations, and descriptions of possible further development of history. The article will deal with Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* and Kant's short writings *Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History*, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, and *Perpetual Peace*.³

1. FIRST STEPS TOWARDS CIVIL SOCIETY

Adam Ferguson opens his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* by words that in nature everything is formed in degrees and that in the case of man the progress continued to the greatest extent:

Not only the individual advances from infancy to manhood, but the species itself from rudeness to civilization. Hence the supposed departure of mankind from the state of their nature; hence our conjectures and different opinions of what man must have been in the first age of his being (Ferguson, 1995, p. 7).

His *Essay* wants to map human and social progress as a process of human ability to use one's own mind which can assure the development and he illustrates it on several examples in the first part of the work. He writes:

The latest efforts of human invention are but a continuation of certain devices which were practised in the earliest ages of the world, and in the rudest state of mankind. What the savage projects, or observes, in the forest, are the steps which led nations, more advanced, from the architecture of the cottage to that of the palace, and conducted the human mind from the perception of sense, to the general conclusions of science (Ferguson, 1995, p. 14).

In the work *Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History* Kant explains the position of man cosmologically – man lives on this planet and should be proud of it. However, he must be able to escape the state of nature and enter the state of society. This was done in small steps through instinct of food, sexual instinct, anticipation of the future and, finally, realisation that he is the true end of nature (MAM, AA 08: 114; p. 225). Man was able to overcome everything on earth thanks to his capacity of reason that caused human progress and development of mankind as such. In the *Second Proposition* of the work *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* he writes that [r]eason, in a creature, is a faculty which enables that creature to extend far beyond the limits of natural instinct, the rules and intentions it follows in using its various powers, and the range of its projects is unbounded” (IaG, AA 08: 18–19; p. 42). In the *Third Proposition* Kant introduces the idea that a human being “should not partake of any other happiness or perfection than that which he has procured for himself without instinct and by his own reason” (IaG, AA 08: 19; p. 43).

Both, Ferguson and Kant, claim that man is able to improve and agree that it is thanks to the ability to use reason. They provide anthropological explanation of history, Ferguson mentions man's principle of progression, his desire of perfection, and says that man employs the powers that nature has given to him (Ferguson, 1995, p. 14) and that “[h]is powers of discernment, or his intellectual faculties, which, under the appellation of *reason*, are distinguished from the analogous endowments of other animals” (Ibid., p. 16).

The fact that people were endowed with the faculty of reason means that human being is not dependent on instinct any longer. Since this moment the success of people has been based on their acts and their own use of reason. It is a gradual process and people can come to the full development of their predispositions at its end. In *Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History* Kant describes the moment of understanding man's own capacity of reason by the understanding that man himself is the end of nature – because his reason enabled him to overcome instincts and he understood that he could use what nature gave him for his own prospect. Man, compared to other animals, was governed by instincts, too, but the difference is that he has disposition for rationality and it is reason which does not allow him to go back to natural state of savages. Through his own curiosity he could explore himself as a rational being and became independent on nature. This was his entrance to history – on one hand, step of great courage, on the other hand, full of danger – because he had to rely only on himself.

The question how an individual can help the overall progress of society was also discussed by both of the philosophers. In Ferguson's philosophy of history the abilities came from generation to generation and each new generation built on the level of knowledge achieved by the previous. The improvement is obvious but he adds that we cannot do it without progress of individuals because species can develop only if individuals progress. Kant shares the same opinion: every individual should be motivated to progress because the most important attribute of a rational individual is the ability to develop inherited experience or knowledge. Thanks to this, each generation – generation of individuals – is able to move forward.

However, an individual never lives alone and all his natural predispositions can be developed only in a social institution in which all his qualities – good or bad – are being present. When Kant says, “[t]he means which nature employs to bring about the development of innate capacities is that of antagonism within society [...] By antagonism, I mean in this context the *unsocial sociability* of men, that is, their tendency to come together in society, coupled, however, with a continual resistance which constantly threatens to break this society up” (IaG, AA 08: 20; p. 44), he describes tendency of people with two opposite verbs – to *associate* with one another (to live in society) and to *isolate* from one another (to live as an individual) (IaG, AA 08: 20–21; p. 44). People are social beings, they like and need society for full-valued life, but at the same time, an individual wants to be an outstanding personality and is driven by “the desire for honour, power, or property, [...] to seek status among his fellows, whom he cannot *bear* yet cannot *bear to leave*” (IaG, AA 08: 21; p. 44). While people want to live in peace, nature wants them to live in unsociable sociability to be active and to develop their predispositions. It is important not to rely on harmony or peaceful life and “[n]ature should thus be thanked for fostering social incompatibility, enviously competitive vanity, and insatiable desires for possession or even power” (IaG, AA 08: 21; p. 45). Conflict becomes an active principle which motivates people to make progress but to fulfil the end of nature and develop the natural predispositions it is necessary for human beings to use their own reason. Nature causes many evils to human beings, nevertheless, these are helpful in the process of achieving greater development of natural predispositions and subsequently of moral, cultural and civilized society.

2. ACTIVITY AND CONFLICT AS MAIN IMPULSES OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The idea of progress is a common motive for Scottish Enlightenment philosophers and I. Kant. Civil society becomes a new term and at the same time a necessary institution representing human natural environment. However, we cannot say that the progress to civil society is a temporal movement, it is rather a key condition for social and civil life of people. Ferguson describes people who are active and it is their natural behaviour to act as members of society and for the good of it. He writes:

To act in the view of his fellow-creatures, to produce his mind in public, to give it all the exercise of sentiment and thought, which pertain to man as a member of society, as a friend, or an enemy, seems to be the principal calling and occupation of his nature. If he must labour, that he may subsist, he can subsist for no better purpose than the good of mankind; nor can he have better

talents than those which qualify him to act with men. Here, indeed, the understanding appears to borrow very much from the passions; and there is a felicity of conduct in human affairs, in which it is difficult to distinguish the promptitude of the head from the ardour and sensibility of the heart. Where both are united, they constitute that superiority of mind, the frequency of which among men, in particular ages and nations, much more than the progress they have made in speculation, or in the practice of mechanic and liberal arts, should determine the rate of their genius, and assign the palm of distinction and honour (Ferguson, 1995, p. 33).

Kant says that an inevitable step in human progress and the highest intent of mankind is when people achieve civil society “which can administer justice universally” (IaG, AA 08: 22; p. 45). It is a just society based on antagonism, and at the same time, on freedom. This freedom – “*freedom under external laws* [...] combined to the greatest possible extent with irresistible force, in other words of establishing a perfectly *just civil constitution*” (IaG, AA 08: 22; pp. 45–46) – in which nature attains its goals, is the basic requirement for this kind of society. Kant knows that this achievement is a long process and human beings have to and will have to try hard to do their best to come closer to this type of constitution. He emphasizes that the problem to achieve civil society “is both the most difficult and the last to be solved by the human race” (IaG, AA 08: 23; p. 46).

This progress cannot be perceived to be an easy linear process neither in Ferguson’s nor Kant’s explanation. It is a period full of changes that all follow an important aim, which is the establishment of civil society, and there are many problems and conflicts that have to be faced during this process. Thus, history of civil society is not for them a history of peace but it is a long way on which the practice of war is necessary. Ferguson says that without it and without the rivalry of nations, “civil society itself could scarcely have found an object, or a form” (1995, p. 28). When dealing with human affairs, he says that every consequence should be drawn from a “principle of union” or a “principle of dissention” and continues that “[t]he state of nature is a state of war or of amity, and men are made to unite from a principle of affection, or from principle of fear” (Ferguson, 1995, p. 21).

Conflict is an essential part of progress, it is something constructive and positive which assures further social development. It can be accepted if it leads to a virtuous aim, and to achieve it, every single individual has to participate on it by his activity. Man can cultivate himself only in society when he is doing his duties as a good citizen. Citizens then become a vital part of social progress because only their eagerness and activity can assure that freedom and equality will be guaranteed and law will be respected. Ferguson understands activity as basic principle of human nature and it characterizes not only progressive people but also progressive nations when he says that “great and powerful states are able to overcome and subdue the weak; polished and commercial nations have more wealth, and practise a greater variety of arts, than the rude” (1995, p. 60).⁴

One of the basic conditions of civil society, which human beings should be aware of, is to be a good citizen and „active citizenship” then becomes a crucial category in understanding the problem. Society cannot exist without people, and with the help of good will, they become citizens with respect to duty and law. Kant introduces something that can be called legal-

practical reason and starts to deal with the concept of good citizen while good man remains only an ideal. It was only thanks to reason that people were able to introduce law and every step in history was based on development of public law and later progress towards international commonwealth. Kant describes civil state, regarded purely as a lawful state, as based on the following *a priori* principles: “1) the *freedom* of every member of society as a *human being*, 2) the *equality* of each with all the others as a *subject*, 3) the *independence* of each member of a commonwealth as a *citizen*” (TP, AA 08: 290; p. 74).

Realization of reason in man is thus partially achieved by formation of civil society universally administering right and justice, but pursuing Kant’s main idea of philosophy of history – which is the idea of perpetual peace – it requires some further steps. Here Kant compares relations among states to relations among people. He writes that: “[t]he problem of establishing a perfect civil constitution is subordinate to the problem of a law-governed external relationship with other states, and cannot be solved unless the latter is also solved” (IaG, AA 08: 24; p. 47). The similarity is in the fact that there exists the same antagonism among states as there is among men. State of peace is achieved through antagonism, people entered society because of antagonism and nature’s aim is to do the same with states. Thus, states enter the state of peace and security only “after many devastations, upheavals and even the complete inner exhaustion of their powers” (Ibid.). These negative experiences would not have been necessary if states had listened to reason “abandoning a lawless state of savagery and entering a federation of peoples in which every state, even the smallest, could expect to derive its security and rights not from its own power or its own legal judgement, but solely from this great federation (*Foedus Amphictyonum*), from a united power and the law-governed decisions of a united will” (Ibid.).

Ferguson’s point of view in the *Essay on the History of Civil Society* is different. He is quite sceptical in the possibility of several states joining one greater political body, and adds that “the admiration of boundless dominion is a ruinous error; and in no instance, perhaps, is the real interest of mankind more entirely mistaken” (1995, p. 61). For him, the most important thing is that every individual, as well as every state, should be active and says:

But the happiness of men, in all cases alike, consists in the blessings of a candid, an active, and strenuous mind. And if we consider the state of society merely as that into which mankind are led by their propensities, as a state to be valued from its effect in preserving the species, in ripening their talents, and exciting their virtues, we need not enlarge our communities, in order to enjoy these advantages. We frequently obtain them in the most remarkable degree, where nations remain independent, and are of a small extent.

He realistically describes relationships among states, speaks of equality, tolerance and independence of nations but does not avoid topics of “real politics” as enlarging territories, unequal treaties, annexation, war, etc. To the issue of problematic relationships between nations of Great Britain he adds: “where a number of states are contiguous, they should be near an equality, in order that they may be mutually objects of respect and consideration, and in order that they may possess that independence in which the political life of a nation consists” (1995, p. 61). He illustrates it by an example that when it was possible that the kingdoms of Spain

were united, and when the fiefs in France were annexed to the crown, it is no longer expedient for the nations of Great Britain to continue disjoined.

3. VISIONS OF FUTURE HISTORY

Based on political experience and everyday reality, Ferguson is also quite sceptical towards suggesting clear scenarios of future. He writes that every step, even in the most enlightened ages, is “made with equal blindness to the future; and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design” (1995, p. 119). Ferguson emphasizes that human nature is always full of expectations and forgets disappointments of the past to have new hopes for future, but it does not mean that there is anything certain, clear, or pre-planned in human future.

According to Kant, the last step of development of human nature is the federation of states represented by the idea of perpetual peace. Although in *Idea* he comes to the inevitable occurrence of war from the intention of nature, not of man, and it is further developed in the writing *Perpetual Peace*, everything should be subordinated to the goal, which is “externally–perfect political constitution as the only possible state within which all natural capacities of mankind can be developed completely” (IaG, AA 08: 27; p. 50). Firstly, it is the evil that motivates mankind to move forward and, secondly, the enlightenment that influences the government. In the state of enlightenment there is no need for war and states should realize that instead of permanent preparations for war it is necessary to set laws which would guarantee secure cosmopolitan state for free and equal citizens. States must gradually realize that wars are extremely dangerous and expensive and that the only way how to live a good life is to “indirectly prepare the way for a great political body of the future, without precedent in the past” (IaG, AA 08: 28; p. 51).

Cosmopolitanism is understood as result of growing enlightenment in which human beings are capable to understand the importance of society and commonwealth. Kant is looking for an ideal form of social coexistence of people and nations in the future. He knows that is not going to be easy, because of human nature and antagonism, but he tries to find a way how to achieve it and hopes that mankind is able to enter a phase where all the conditions for the highest aim of nature, “a universal *cosmopolitan existence*” (IaG, AA 08: 28; p. 51), would be fulfilled. In this type of society, there are new rules on which people have agreed, and state guarantees people’s rights and their freedom.

This is connected with the way how politics should look like. He says that it should always go hand in hand with morality and the most important moral task is “to bring about perpetual peace, which is desirable not only as a physical good, but also as a state of affairs which must arise out of recognising one’s duty” (ZeF, AA 08: 376; p. 122). Politics should be connected with the idea of public right and, according to him, it can rely on morality because its rules should be also the basis of politics. Why? In case of morality, we know that its rules are good, and this cannot be told about politics. He says:

A true system of politics cannot therefore take a single step without first paying tribute to morality. And although politics in itself is a difficult art, no art is required to combine it with morality. For as soon as the two come into conflict, morality can cut through the knot which politics cannot untie. The rights of man must be held sacred, however great a sacrifice the ruling power may have to make. There can be no half measures here; it is no use devising hybrid solutions such as a pragmatically conditioned right halfway between right and utility. For all politics must bend the knee before right, although politics may hope in return to arrive, however slowly, at a stage of lasting brilliance (ZeF, AA 08: 380; p. 125).

When we follow Kant's argumentation, we see that in the relationship of what *is* and what *ought to be*, he always prefers what ought to be, and he asks how it is possible to achieve realization of public right. He says that "if we consider it absolutely necessary to couple the concept of right with politics, or even to make it a limiting condition of politics, it must be conceded that the two are compatible" (ZeF, AA 08: 372; pp. 117–118). The question of morality and politics and their mutual relationship in Kant's philosophy is based on justice and respect for human rights and the movement from the state of nature, which is characterized by war, towards the state of peace cannot be achieved without the notion of law. True system of politics is then connected with the idea of public right and it can rely on morality because its rules should be also the basis of politics.

Based on these ideas we can see that Ferguson's and Kant's portrayal of possible future is not the same and it is also connected with how they see the relationships among states. On one hand, Ferguson, using words of F. Oz-Salzberger, "was not concerned with demonstrating that mankind moves along a preconditioned course towards elevated future. Fergusons history is indeterminist and open-ended. His good polity is not a theoretical artefact projected into a dim future, but an imperfect reality." (1995, p. xx). Ferguson did not provide any descriptions of the ways how the world should look like in future or how it should progress. In the *Essay* we see his own experience when judging the era of his present, and the realistic point of view is also present in his non-prophetic description of future. On the other hand, Kant focuses on future which is represented by approaching the idea of perpetual peace, and he presents a concept of an ideal politics based on law, duty and justice.

ABSTRACT: The paper compares central issues of philosophy of history of A. Ferguson and I. Kant. It deals with their explanation of origins and development of civil society, and characterizes its basic features, focusing on progress motivated by fruitful conflict and tension among individuals and nations. It also focuses on the role of citizens in civil society and the question of their activity. Then, in connection with Ferguson's and Kant's views on relationships among states the paper discusses their different portrayal of possible future history.

KEYWORDS: Kant – Adam Ferguson – philosophy of history – man – civil society – progress.

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NOTES

- 1 Sandra Zákutná is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Presov, Slovakia. She works on political philosophy, especially Kant's, and Enlightenment philosophy.
- 2 For more information about translations of the works of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy in German and comments on details of particular translations see KLEMMME, H. E. (ed.). 2000. *Reception of the Scottish Enlightenment in Germany. Six Significant Translations, 1755-1782*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press 2000.
- 3 All English translations of Kant's works are cited from Kant, I.: *Political Writings (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought)* 2nd Edition, transl. by H. B. Nisbet, ed. H. S. Reiss. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991.
- 4 More on the importance of activity in Ferguson's thought can be found in: F. Oz-Salzberger: Ferguson's Politics of Action. In: Heath E. – Merolle V. (eds.) *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature*. London: Pickering & Chatto 2008, pp. 147 – 156.

Recebido / Received: 17/11/14

Aprovado / Approved: 20/12/14