

# Adam Ferguson

## from Enlightenment to Romanticism<sup>1</sup>

### Summary

*In this essay the author emphasizes the concepts of materialism and idealism as the premise of philosophical reasoning.*

*While materialism leads to determinism in politics, and to "le règne de l'intolérance", as Benjamin Constant called it, idealism is the premise of historicism, i.e. of the concept according to which societies are in continuous change. Hence the concept of liberalism in politics, and that of romanticism in literature. Romantic literature, in particular, extols the concept of 'nation' and that of individuality.*

*After sketching a brief picture of European philosophy in the eighteenth century, the author concludes that Ferguson cannot be a materialistic philosopher, his reasoning being quite distinct from philosophical materialism. Although in An Essay he ignores at all religion, his philosophical premises, as he declares himself, are in Stoicism and Ciceronianism. Philosophically, as for the idea of the universe, he is in the limits of eighteenth-century deism, and Stoicism and Ciceronianism, often neglected by scholars, are much more than the precursors of deism, being, by contrast, a complete formulation of it. Nevertheless his work represents more than an early intimation of nineteenth-century philosophy.*

*Stoicism, from a political point of view, means in fact commitment to political life and to the sense of duty. It foreshadows the concepts of opposition and contrast and, finally, the contests of parties in the political arena of Ferguson's years. In some measure An Essay can be defined as a translation of Stoicism into contemporary political philosophy, as the precursor of romanticism and philosophical idealism. And as romanticism is commitment to political life, not so materialism, that prefigures determinism and inactivity of the individuals.*

*The reasoning of An Essay cannot be in fact explained without Macpherson and the Highlands, i.e. without the romantic movement. Revealing, from this point of view, is the reception of Ferguson's works in Germany. The Institutes was in fact translated into German by the Popularphilosoph Christian Garve with educational aims, typical of German Enlightenment, while the reasoning of the "great, noble Ferguson" in An Essay was praised particularly by the romantic philosopher Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, the author, among other things, of the novel Woldemar.*

### Philosophical premises: between Materialism and Idealism

To understand an author, and to understand Ferguson in particular, one must move from the general, philosophical concepts, which are the premise of the philosophy of that author.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was delivered on 26 June 2010 at the Princeton Theological Seminary, for the joint conference of the 'Eighteenth-Century Scottish Studies Society' and the 'Adam Smith Society'.

And, as far as I know, no author explained with more perspicuity than **Friedrich Engels** those that he called 'the fundamental questions' of philosophy, when writing the following words:

"The great, fundamental question of the whole, and especially of recent philosophy, is that of the relation of the Thought with the Being.... of the Spirit with Nature, the highest question of the whole philosophy... that, after all, played a great role also in the Scholastics of the Middle Ages, the question: what was there, in the beginning, the Spirit or the Nature? This question presented itself, concerning the Church, this way: has God created the World, or did the World exist from Eternity? According to the way in which this question was answered, the philosophers divided themselves in two great camps. Those who believed that at the origin there was the Spirit against Nature, and also, in the last resort, somehow believed in the Creation of the World.... built the camp of Idealism. The others, who at the origin saw Nature, belong to the different Schools of Materialism."<sup>2</sup>

As for Enlightenment and Romanticism, the two camps, of materialism and idealism, represent two distinct philosophical categories, with distinct features, that in no case can be confounded, although the history of ideas is a continuous, uninterrupted flow, in which what is new replaces what is old, and what is old survives for a while, until it is buried by what, in its turn, is new in history.

Enlightenment represents undoubtedly the category of philosophical Materialism, although, obviously, there are, in it, early intimations of Romanticism. And irreligion, that is the particular feature of Enlightenment, and its main character, is the first step towards Materialism.

**Baron d'Holbach** (1723-89) fully theorized Materialism in his *Système de la Nature* (1770), a book that the Romantic and Liberal writer **Benjamin Constant** (1767-1830) defined as a "long acharnement d'un vieillard à fermer devant lui tout avenir", as an "inexplicable soif de destruction". D'Holbach's "enthousiasme" against the religion, "une idée douce et consolante", seemed to Constant a "bizarre délire". He complained, furthermore, that the ideas of irreligion and materialism received from the authorities "un appui violent et factice"<sup>3</sup> in eighteenth-century France, "le règne de l'intolérance".

Philosophical materialism dominated the eighteenth century, not only in France, but all over in Europe. Not to forget that, after all, "the early Enlightenment was an impressively unified process across Europe, indeed a remarkable demonstration of the essential cohesion of European history".<sup>4</sup>

D'Holbach's materialism had a long history behind it. In the seventeenth century **Descartes's** (1596-1650) philosophy, with the primacy of reason, had established the superiority of the thought on authority and tradition, although he tried to accommodate his ideas to Christian belief. In **Spinoza** (1632-77) we find no such attempt,

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<sup>2</sup> Translation by author. The German text reads as follows: "Die große Grundfrage aller, speziell neueren Philosophie, ist die nach dem Verhältnis des Denkens zum Sein ..... des Geistes zur Natur, die höchste Frage der gesamten Philosophie... die übrigens auch in der Scholastik des Mittelalters ihre große Rolle spielte, die Frage: was ist das Ursprüngliche, der Geist oder die Natur? ..... Diese Frage spitzte sich, der Kirche gegenüber, dahin zu: hat Gott die Welt erschaffen, oder ist die Welt von Ewigkeit da? Je nachdem diese Frage so oder so beantwortet wurde, spalteten sich die Philosophen in zwei große Lager. Diejenigen, die die Ursprünglichkeit des Geistes gegenüber der Natur behaupteten, also in letzter Instanz einer Welterschöpfung irgendeiner Art annahmen.... bildeten das Lager des Idealismus. Die andern, die die Natur als das Ursprüngliche ansahen, gehören zu den verschiedenen Schulen des Materialismus...". Friedrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie*, in *Marx-Engels Werke*, Dietz Verlag (Berlin, 1962), Band 21, pp. 274-5.

<sup>3</sup> See Constant, *De la Religion*, in *Œuvres*, Gallimard, (Paris, 1957), p. 1370. The *Système* was defined by Joseph Priestley as the 'Bible of Atheism', in *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, in *The Works of Joseph Priestley* (London 1817-32, repr. New York and London, 1983), letter XI, p. 382.

<sup>4</sup> See Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford UP, 2001), p. 137.

his philosophy representing pure materialism and irreligion, no reasoning in it being based on God's word or in the Commandments.

### The English Deists

Even worse, so to say, the Dutch-born **Bernard de Mandeville** (1670-1733), who in the *Fable of the Bees* (1723), established selfishness as the fundamental principle of life, banning any idea of metaphysics, of piety and religion. And the **Earl of Shaftesbury** (1671-1713), in his *Characteristics* (1711), maintained that morality is independent of religion, and that religious worship should not be imposed by the magistrate, in this way enunciating the doctrine of the separation of church and state. His doctrine is pure deism, and consists in the view that the existence of God can be discovered by man's reason, unassisted by revelation.

Apart from Shaftesbury, also Toland, Collins, Tindal need to be mentioned. These writers, or 'minute philosophers', as **Bishop Berkeley** (1685-1753) called them in *Alcyphron*, established the primacy of reason above tradition. From now onwards, tradition had no more a role to play in philosophy, at least during the eighteenth century.

**John Toland** (1670-1722), who coined the term 'pantheist', published in 1696 *Christianity not Mysterious*, which was attacked by the defenders of traditional theology. He criticized the uncritical acceptance of beliefs and the dogmatism of established religion, under the influence of Locke's ideas of toleration.

**Anthony Collins** (1676-1729), in his *Discourse of Free-Thinking* (1713) and in the *Philosophical Inquiry concerning Human Liberty* (1717), by opposing restrictions on intellectual enquiry, defended reason, and was praised by Joseph Priestley and Voltaire, while Bishop Berkeley read him as a covert atheist.

**Matthew Tindal** (1657-1733), in *Christianity as old as the Creation* (1730), the so called 'Deist's Bible', questioned the basis of any revelation, maintaining that it can add nothing to natural religion, and that this can be discovered by the sole reason.

Last, **William Wollaston** (1660-1724), in *The Religion of Nature Delineated* (1724), that was soon translated into French and German, established a 'first cause' uncaused, self-existent, eternal, incorporeal, defined 'the law of Reason' as 'the great law of our nature',<sup>5</sup> added that gravitation requires 'some external cause', insisting on the 'frame and constitution of the world', on its 'magnificence' and 'uniformity', which cannot be produced by 'chance' but, necessarily, must be produced by a divine Providence.

### French philosophy

As for contemporary French philosophy, **Montesquieu's** *Lettres Persanes* (1721), that not many modern scholars seem to have read, is a brilliant satire of religion, this being its coherent design or argument. It is not really inferior, from this point of view, to Voltaire's writings.

*L'Esprit des Lois* (1748) was accused of Spinozism by the Jesuits and Jansenists and, notwithstanding the *Défense de l'Esprit des Lois* on the part of its author,<sup>6</sup> in 1751 the book was placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*.

If we cannot say that Montesquieu is a materialistic philosopher, he certainly leaves aside, in his enquiry, any idea of religion and metaphysics and, in politics, with his liberalism, any idea of authority and tradition. It is

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<sup>5</sup> *The Religion of Nature delineated*, the sixth edition (London, 1738), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> See Montesquieu, *Œuvres Complètes*, Gallimard (Paris, 1951), II, p. 1121 onwards.

uncertain which one of the two horns of the dilemma he believed in, whether in Materialism or Idealism. Certainly, not in tradition.

Apart from **Voltaire** (1694-1778), whose philosophy was essentially irreligion, Materialism was fully theorized by **Lamettrie** (1709-51), with *L'Histoire Naturelle de l'Âme* (1745), and *L'Homme Machine* (1748), while it is the leading idea of the Encyclopaedists, **Diderot** (1713-84) and **D'Alembert** (1717-1783), and of **Condillac** (1715-80), with his *Traité des Sensations* (1754), not to mention **Condorcet** (1743-94), who published in 1794 his *Esquisse d'un Tableau des Progrès de l'Esprit Humain*. Last, **Rousseau** (1712-78), the prophet of the French Revolution, whose writings can be defined as the *political manifesto* of that grandiose event, at the same time the culminating point of the philosophy of the century, and the acme of Materialism and irreligion.

This is, briefly sketched, a picture of French philosophy in the 18th century.

If we revert now to contemporary British philosophy, apart from the 'free-thinkers' or 'minute philosophers', we find **David Hartley** (1705-57), who was a medical doctor, and this explains the main character of his *Observations on Man* (1749), more scientific and less ideological than his French counterpart. His doctrines led to Materialism, and yet he denied to be a Materialist, and professed himself a devout Christian, writing that "something must have existed from all Eternity; or, there never was a Time when Nothing existed" (chap. I, prop. I), and that "God is a Spiritual, or immaterial Being" (ibid., prop. V). Furthermore, "the objection made against the Miracles recorded in the Scriptures, from their being contrary to the Course of Nature, is of little or no force" (chap. II, prop. 28).

**Joseph Priestley** (1733-1804) debated the problems of Materialism and Idealism in his *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* (1774), in the *Disquisitions on Matter and Spirit* (1777) and in *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated* (1777), but it would be hazardous to define him a materialistic philosopher, at least in the sense of the contemporary French counterparts. He is in reality in the limits of deism, and he believes in "the Author" as the "primary, intelligent cause," in the "Benevolence of the Deity"<sup>7</sup>, in the "plan of universal providence".<sup>8</sup>

### Scottish Philosophy

As for contemporary Scottish philosophy, and as for **David Hume** (1711-76), the point is that, in general, empiricism leads to Materialism, but I will here content myself with what J. Priestley wrote, of the author of the *Treatise*:

"His object was literary reputation, not the pursuit of truth, or the advancement of virtue and happiness; and it was much more easy to make a figure by disturbing the systems of others, than by erecting any of his own".<sup>9</sup>

In particular, in the *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, Philo speaks the sentiments of the writer, but he advances "nothing but common-place objections against the belief of a God". In conclusion, though the debate "closes in

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<sup>7</sup> *Letters*, in *Works* (London, 181-32, repr. New York and London, 1983), p. 332 and 344.

<sup>8</sup> J. Priestley, *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism and Philosophical Necessity, in a Correspondence between Dr. Price and Dr. Priestley* (London, 1778, repr. New York, 1977), p. xxii.

<sup>9</sup> *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, in *Works* (London, 1817-1832, repr. New York and London, 1983), Letter IX, 'An Examination of Mr Hume's Dialogues on Natural Religion', p. 367 ff.

Adam Ferguson echoes Priestley's judgment writing as follows: "I think you rather try to pull down other peoples Doctrines than Establish any of your own", *The Manuscripts of Adam Ferguson*, edited by V. Merolle, Pickering & Chatto (London, 2006), XXV, p. 207.

favour of the theist, the victory is clearly on the side of the atheist", and the work, according to Priestley, substantially ends by promoting the cause of atheism.

**Adam Smith** (1723-90), on his part, cannot be considered as a materialistic philosopher, at least in the sense of Engels and the French.

Among his works, the *History of Astronomy* and the *History of Ancient Physics* are particularly revealing of his ideas, concerning the origin of the world and the place of man in the universe. But it shows a Smith in the limits of English deism, to which must be added the innate prudence of the man: that prudence, for example, which made him decline to be the literary executor of Hume's *Dialogues*.

Last, **Adam Ferguson**. This being, briefly sketched, the picture of contemporary French and British philosophy, who could say that he was a materialistic philosopher? And who could say that he was a deistical writer?

He claimed his partiality to Stoical philosophy and his own inspiration from Stoicism.<sup>10</sup> And the cosmology of the Stoics can be summarized with the words of Cicero:

"Who, on seeing the regular motions of the heaven and the fixed order of the stars and the accurate interconnection and interrelation of all things, can deny that these things possess any rational design....? When we see something moved by *machinery*, like an *orrery* or *clock* or many other such things, we do not doubt that these contrivances are the works of reason; when therefore we behold *the whole compass of the heaven moving with revolutions of marvellous velocity and executing with perfect regularity the annual changes of the season with absolute safety and security* for all things, how can we doubt that all this is effected not merely by reason, but by a reason that is transcendent and divine?"<sup>11</sup>

As for optimism, or the concept that this is the best of all possible worlds, which gives the clue to understand the conception of harmonies in eighteenth-century philosophy, it is clearly stated in Cicero's sentences: "Now *the government of the world contains nothing that could possibly be censured*; given the existing elements, the *best that could be produced from them has been produced*. Let someone prove *that it could have been better. But no one will ever prove this....*".<sup>12</sup>

In the eighteenth century not only Stoic moral philosophy, but even Stoic cosmology, at Hume's dismay, had not been superseded by the new conception of the universe.<sup>13</sup>

Newton had given scientific reasons to the intuitions of the Stoics, while, in Scotland, his pupil and follower, Colin McLaurin, in his *Account*,<sup>14</sup> described the operations of nature with a vocabulary that closely followed Cicero's terminology.

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<sup>10</sup> Ferguson, *Principles*, I, 'Introduction', pp. 7-8.

<sup>11</sup> Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, II.38.97; trans. Loeb Classical Library.

<sup>12</sup> Cicero, *ibid.*, II.34.86-7. My italics. See furthermore *ibid.*, II.45-6.115-117, where Cicero speaks of "that rational and intelligent substance .....which draws and collects the outermost particles towards the centre .... all its parts must converge towards the centre .... its vast complex of gravitational forces .... on the same principle the sea ..... seeks the centre and so is massed into a sphere uniform on all sides .... the stars ..... maintain their spherical form by their own internal gravitation...."

<sup>13</sup> Hume complained that "the most durable, as well as justest fame, has been acquired by the *easy philosophy*, and that abstract reasoners seem hitherto to have enjoyed only a momentary reputation, from the caprice or ignorance of their own age.... The fame of Cicero flourishes at present, but that of Aristotle is utterly decayed", Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, in *Enquiries*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, third edition, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975), Section I, p. 7.

In a letter to Lord Kames, he drew up an unsympathetic portrait of Cicero, whose first *Philippic* 'is not much admired by the ancients', while in the second 'he gives a full loose to his scurrility', Hume to Lord Kames, 13 June 1742, in *The Letters of David Hume*, I, pp. 41-2.

<sup>14</sup> Colin McLaurin, *Account of Sir Isaac Newton's Discoveries*, P. Murdoch (London, 1748).

Shaftesbury, **Francis Hutcheson** (1694-1746), Adam Smith in his *History of Astronomy* and *History of Ancient Physics*, even Hume in *The Natural History of Religion* and in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, repeated not only concepts, but even Cicero's wording, particularly from the *De Natura Deorum*,<sup>15</sup> about the structure of the universe. Nor one needs to forget that the *Mens*, or *Universal Mind* of the Stoics, *was no more than the God of incoming Christianity*. And Cicero, on his part, declared that "God does exist",<sup>16</sup> and added that there is "a single divine and all-pervading spirit".<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, philosophical materialism is far from being the background, much less the premise, of Ferguson's philosophy, which finds its roots in the tradition of Christianity instead, although it is influenced by some of the leading ideas of the Enlightenment. And, no doubt, *from Stoicism he derives the ethics of the duty and the principle of commitment to political life, in opposition to Epicureanism and Materialism*.

From a biographical point of view, he was accused of being 'an avowed deist', while, towards the end of his life, he had conceived "too great an aversion to the Church".<sup>18</sup> But his deism is in the limits of Stoicism, and is far from emphasizing the materialistic motives of that philosophical school: motives that, in no case, were in it of prime importance.

### **The problem of the absence of religion from *An Essay***

One of the problems concerning *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, is the complete absence of religion from it. It was first noted by the *Monthly Review* and in the *Mémoires Littéraires de la Grande Bretagne*, but there are no documents that explain Ferguson's reasons for this omission.

In general one can observe, as David Raynor has done, that the reviewer of the *Mémoires* "ironically professed to admire Ferguson's prudence in avoiding any discussion of such a delicate subject".<sup>19</sup> And it is a matter of fact, as David Hume wrote in a letter to William Robertson, that the popularity of Robertson's *History of Scotland* on his own *History*, -both appearing in 1759-, was "forwarded by its prudence, and by the deference paid to established opinions".<sup>20</sup> Deference, it is needless to say, that was quite absent in Hume's *History*.

Therefore, did Ferguson intentionally omit any treatment of the subject of religion, from *An Essay*? Such a treatment rather appears, to the present author, as unnecessary, in the general economy of the narrative. It should have been dealt with separately, in this case making of Ferguson a different author, a romantic author,

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<sup>15</sup> On this subject see V. Merolle, 'Introductory Essay' to Ferguson's *The Manuscripts*, particularly pp. xv-xix.

John Desaguliers, in *The Newtonian System of the World* (1728) asserted that "The System of the Universe, as taught by Pythagoras, Philolaus, and others of the Ancients, is the same, which was since revived by Copernicus... and at last demonstrated by Sir Isaac Newton... All the difference between the modern and ancient System, is only what is added to it since the Invention of the Telescope", cited in A. O. Aldridge, 'Shaftesbury and the Deist Manifesto', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, New Series, vol. 41, part 2, (Philadelphia, June 1951), pp. 295-385, *ibid.*, p. 300. And Conyers Middleton: "Several of the fundamental principles of the modern philosophy which pass for the original discoveries of these later times, are the revival rather of ancient notions maintained by some of the first philosophers of whom we have any notions in history", C. Middleton, *Cicero's Life and Letters* (Edinburgh, 1887), p. 305. The book was first published in 1741.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 5.16-17.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 35-90. On the influence of Ciceronianism on Ferguson, particularly as for Stoic moral philosophy, see D. Allan, *Adam Ferguson*, *op. cit.*, chap. II, "The Basis of Moral Nature": The Teacher and the Moralist', pp. 21-42.

<sup>18</sup> See Ferguson, *Correspondence*, *op. cit.*, II, p. 544.

<sup>19</sup> See D. Raynor, 'Why did David Hume dislike Adam Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*?', in *Adam Ferguson: Philosophy, Politics and Society*, edited by E. Heath and V. Merolle, Pickering & Chatto (London, 2009), pp. 45-72, in particular pp. 48 ff.

<sup>20</sup> Hume to Robertson, London, February 1759, in *The Letters of David Hume*, I, p. 299, and to Smith, 28 July 1759, *ibid.*, I, p. 314.

one of the Romantics who reacted to the irreligion of Enlightenment, emphasizing the role of religion above reason. This was not the case of Ferguson who, as we shall see, certainly was a pre-Romantic,<sup>21</sup> even a full-Romantic, for some respect but, in some measure, also a man of his own century.

There was, in his reasoning, some rationalism, that did not allow him to give room to religion, or to the 'sentiment' of the romantics. Nevertheless, from the point of view of politics, he was clearly a 'liberal and romantic'. *If he did not actually react to the 'uniformity' and to the 'levelling reason' of Enlightenment in the way of the 'religious' writers, i.e. making appeal to religion and to the sentiment, he certainly expounded concepts quite distinct from it.* And Liberalism can be defined as the eighteenth-century legacy, or product, of Enlightenment, succeeding to it, embodying elements of it in writers like Montesquieu, Ferguson, Constant, but reacting to it in the 'reactionary' writers, like **Louis De Bonald** (1754-1840), the author of the *Théorie du pouvoir politique et religieux* (1796), **François René de Chateaubriand** (1768-1848), the father of French Romanticism, with his *Génie du Christianisme* (1802) and *Les Martyrs* (1809), or **Joseph de Maistre** (1753-1821), the author of *Du Pape* (1819) and of the *Soirées de Saint Pétersbourg* (1821). Not to forget that **Alessandro Manzoni** (1785-1873), rendering in poetry the categories of Enlightenment and Romanticism, i.e. the philosophical concepts of the history of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, wrote that these centuries were "l'un contro l'altro armati",<sup>22</sup> in the sense of succeeding to each other with distinct, even opposite features, but also as the last, Romanticism, reacting to Enlightenment, and incorporating, in part, its *truth* in a more advanced synthesis, as we can add having recourse to the philosophical category of 'historicism'.

### From Enlightenment to Romanticism

In general, as said above, the 18th century is the century of Rationalism, the 19th century is the century of Romanticism. As a reaction to Rationalism, in Romantic literature reason surrenders to sentiment.<sup>23</sup> The poetry of **Alexander Pope** (1688-1744), who in some measure symbolizes the age of Enlightenment, gives room to the individualism of the Romantic hero, of **Wolfgang von Goethe's** (1749-1832) *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers* (1774), of **Constant's** *Adolphe* (1816), of **Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's** (1743-1819) *Woldemar* (1796), of **Ugo Foscolo's** (1778-1827) *Ultime Lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (1802), of **Chateaubriand's** *René* (1802). Along with the romantic hero, goes the 'primitivism', in Chateaubriand's *Atala* (1801) and *Les Natchez* (1826), of **Bernardin de Saint-Pierre** (1737-1814) in *Paul et Virginie* (1788), and of other authors: primitivism that, paradoxically, finds a precursor in Rousseau's 'sauvage', but a main source of inspiration in the travel literature.

At the same time in politics the concept of 'uniformity' is replaced by that of 'variety', or by what is 'individual'. This is against anything that is considered as 'artificial', or the product of reason, which aims at 'levelling' laws, customs, societies. So in Burke, for example, in his battle against Warren Hastings, guilty of do not respecting the 'original' Indian civilization. So in Smith, in his criticism of the 'man of system' and of the 'political speculators'. So in Ferguson's criticism of the 'projectors' and of their 'visionary plans'.

Hence the concept of 'history', as fundamental to understand human societies and their development, of 'history' that cannot be replaced by any 'artificial' construction, dictated by reason. In particular, the eighteenth-century politics of the 'green carpet', -where peoples were conferred upon dynasties, and not dynasties to the

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<sup>21</sup> See Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, (1936), erstes Kapitel, 'Die Vorbereiter', pp. 16-28.

<sup>22</sup> "two centuries/ armed against each other", see Manzoni's ode *Il Cinque Maggio*, for the death of Napoleon, strophe 8, lines 1-2.

<sup>23</sup> See in this context the concept of 'romantic agony', associated with Mario Praz's *La Carne, la Morte e il Diavolo nella Letteratura Romantica*, first published in 1930.

peoples-, gave life to 'artificial' constructions. To them reacted the romantic and liberal period, with the wars of liberation of Greece, of Belgium, and the Italian Risorgimento.

Therefore Historicism in philosophy becomes Liberalism in politics, with the fundamental concept of 'liberty'. Hence the concept of 'nations', that succeeds to the cosmopolitanism of Enlightenment, and the 'liberation' of European peoples. This is a main subject of Manzoni's poetry, whose ode *Marzo 1821* is dedicated 'to the memory of Theodor Körner, poet and soldier of the German independence, who died on the battlefield of Leipzig on 18 October 1813, and whose name is dear to all the peoples who fight to defend or to re-conquer a homeland'.<sup>24</sup> Hence the 'liberal' ideology of **Friedrich Schiller** (1759-1805) in *Die Räuber* (1781), in *Don Carlos* (1787), in *Wilhelm Tell* (1804), which is a manifesto for political freedom, while in *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* (1795-96) Schiller theorizes the distinctive character of modern poetry from its approach to nature.

### **James Macpherson**

The Romantic literature had been preceded, in Germany, by the *Sturm und Drang* movement (1770-1780), which represented an explosion of passion, irrationalism, individualism, in opposition to the 'rationalism' of the Enlightenment. The principal theorist of the new movement had been **Johann Gottfried Herder** (1744-1803), who, in the *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (1778-79), exemplified the principle according to which the true poetry is the poetry of the people, while in the *Ideen zur Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784-91) he emphasized the importance of the historical method. And the historical method is the distinctive character of **Sir Walter Scott's** (1771-1832) novels, and of Manzoni's *The Betrothed*.

Nevertheless, we could not conceive the *Sturm und Drang* without **James Macpherson's** (1736-96) 'Ossian'. Macpherson published in 1760 the *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland*, and in 1761 *Fingal*. These poems were at the origin of the romantic movement, being at the same time their precursors and principal source of inspiration. They "caused a sensation because they burst in a literary scene used to mannered fiction, decorous poetry and high-minded history, with heavy admixtures of moral philosophy. Beneath the polished surface of convention there stood, suddenly revealed, abysses of raw instinct and emotion, of lust and bloodlust, and the reading public loved it. From Lisbon to Riga young men (young women less often) went into fits of gloom and contemplated lovelorn suicide and so on. It marked the start of the Romantic Movement".<sup>25</sup>

And we cannot mention James Macpherson without considering that he was introduced to the Edinburgh Literati by Adam Ferguson, who was a Highlander, having been born at Logierait, a Gaelic-speaking parish, in 1723, the son of a minister who spoke only Gaelic, and no English at all, to the age of twelve. The young Ferguson was appointed chaplain to the Black Watch Regiment by recommendation of the Duchess Dowager of Atholl, spoke currently Gaelic with the soldiers, and preached them a Gaelic Sermon on 18 Dec. 1745. At Logierait he received James Macpherson, and introduced him to Hugh Blair.

As Michael Fry has exhaustively demonstrated, there is Scotland behind *An Essay*. "Beneath Ferguson's philosophy lies Macpherson's poetry ... Ferguson and Macpherson thus had an attitude to modern civilization

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<sup>24</sup> Translation by author.

<sup>25</sup> M. Fry, 'Ferguson the Highlander', in E. Heath-V. Merolle eds, *Adam Ferguson: Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Pickering & Chatto Publishers (London, 2009), pp. 9-24, *ibid.*, p. 15.

differing somewhat from that of other literati .... The passing of Ossian's world symbolized to them the end of a Gaelic way of life." <sup>26</sup> And the 'other literati' were no more than the literati of the Scottish Enlightenment.

Therefore, how to read *An Essay*, without thinking of the wildlife of the Highlands and of the poetry of Ossian? And, finally, without the Romantic movement?

We maintained and, hopefully, demonstrated, in the paper we delivered last year in Saint Andrews, how Ferguson's political philosophy is no more than a chapter in the history of European Liberalism, and how in his work we find Romantic and Liberal ideas fully formulated and conceptualized, nor do we need to repeat here what we have already said.

This appears, in particular, with a comparison of concepts and passages from his works, and from these of the principal authors of European liberalism: Benjamin Constant, -who attended his lessons in Edinburgh-, of Tocqueville, last of Friedrich Augustus von Hayek and Benedetto Croce, the 'philosopher of liberty'. This proves that Ferguson is in reality more than a bridge between the two conceptions, more than a bridge between the century of Enlightenment and that of Romanticism and Liberalism.

And Liberalism cannot be set in the category of philosophical Materialism, although it can contain, and certainly contains, elements of Materialism, at least as for the problem of the origin of the world. Nevertheless, the political philosophy of Romanticism-Historicism-Liberalism mostly inclines towards philosophical Idealism.<sup>27</sup>

### **Ferguson's reception in Germany**

It is no case that Ferguson's works, *An Essay* first of all, enjoyed a particular reception in Germany, the seat of the Romantic movement.

His *Institutes* was translated by Christian Garve, who was a *Popularphilosoph*, and *Popularphilosophie* was then current in German Enlightenment. Its aim was educational, not yet romantic and liberal. German *Aufklärer* translated and read Ferguson with educational purposes, but only the Romantics recognised in him ideas similar to their owns, i.e., pre-romantic, or romantic, ideas. After all, a man of the Enlightenment, and of the German Enlightenment in particular, with its emphasis on education, could not understand the reasoning of *An Essay* and, in particular, the concept of conflict, and the role of parties, identified with the factions.

Therefore, it is only with Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, his "lifelong admirer", that Ferguson's works gained full recognition in Germany. But, who was Jacobi?

In Sir Isaiah Berlin's words, Jacobi was a "mystical metaphysician", a "fervent anti-rationalist", and a leader of a German Counter-Enlightenment movement whose "arch-enemy is Voltaire".<sup>28</sup>

His idea of freedom "in the political context is distinctly liberal".<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> M. Fry, *ibidem*, pp. 22-3.

<sup>27</sup> For example, of the three great Italian Romantic poets of the early nineteenth century, only Manzoni was catholic and, philosophically, idealistic. By contrast, Giacomo Leopardi and Ugo Foscolo were both atheists and philosophically materialistic, although they did not plead the case for materialism, which is nevertheless clear from their poetry.

As for the principal French Romantic authors: Constant, M.me de Stael, B. de Saint Pierre, Chateaubriand, de Maistre; German: Hamann, Herder, Jacobi, Humboldt, Schiller, Goethe, Hegel; British: Wm Blake, Wm Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Shelley, Sir W. Scott, in their writings one can find occasional elements of philosophical materialism, only in part rationalism.

<sup>28</sup> I. Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 17, 182, 9.

<sup>29</sup> See F. Oz-Salzberger, *Translating the Enlightenment*, Clarendon Press (Oxford, 1995), p. 259.

In *Woldemar*, "a Sturm und Drang novel with a Werther-like hero, a man of strong feelings and dangerous emotions", Carl Sidney, a student of Ferguson in Edinburgh, is introduced into the plot, and Woldemar says that *An Essay* "marked an epoch in his life".

In *Etwas das Lessing gesagt hat* Jacobi praised Johannes von Müller, "a defender of papacy", attacking "absolutist or unlimited political power". He considers the state as "a machine of coercion", and is for "governmental minimalism". Last, in his *Über die Lehre des Spinoza* (1785), "a critique of Enlightenment concept of reason ..... argued that rational thinking leads to atheism and fatalism .... accused Lessing of Spinozism".<sup>30</sup>

In both the above works he cites at length from *An Essay*, from "the great noble Ferguson", whose "idea of conflict" he embraced.

And yet, in a letter of 27 March 1811, he had to complain that "only little use has been made (of *An Essay*) so far ..... and I have often debated in my heart of hearts about the reasons for it." Furthermore, only the first part of the *Principles* was translated into German, "but the second was not, apparently because the first found no admirers". And, he concluded, "Thou shalt have no Gods other than Kant, was then the commandment in Germany".<sup>31</sup>

*The above statement is the most eloquent demonstration of the thesis of the present essay: i.e., that only the Romantics and Liberals could understand the real meaning of An Essay and of the Principles, whose reasoning was, by contrast, alien to the world of Enlightenment. And Enlightenment could not accept the idea of conflict, and of continuous, uninterrupted progress, which is the main concept of Romanticism, Historicism and Liberalism, instead.*

In particular, while French Enlightenment believed in the idea of 'perfection', in the possibility of realizing 'the best of possible worlds', that, once realized, would remain unaltered, German Enlightenment believed in education. The hidden meaning of the philosophy of Kant, in reality, is in the idea that the task of the 'philosopher', through the "public use of reason",<sup>32</sup> is that of 'enlightening' the princes. Hence the eulogy of Frederick II, a prince who, in matters of religion, believes that it is his duty "nothing to prescribe", but to leave to his subjects "complete freedom", and who "refuses even the proud name of tolerance". Therefore, he is himself an "enlightened prince" because, "at least in matters of conscience", he first let them "obey to their own reason".<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless the motto of Frederick was: "Reason, as much as you want, and on any subject you want, but obey!"<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 257, 260, 265, 274.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 278. The author adds that Jacobi "in the 1790s used the *Principles* to support his polemic against the ethical doctrines of Kant and Fichte".

<sup>32</sup> See, in particular, I. Kant, "Was ist Aufklärung?", Königsberg in Preußen, den 30. Septemb. 1784, in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin, 1912), pp. 33-42.

<sup>33</sup> "Ein Fürst, der es seiner nicht unwürdig findet, zu sagen: daß er es für Pflicht hatte, in Religionsdingen den Menschen nichts vorzuschreiben, sondern ihnen darin wolle Freiheit zu lassen, der also selbst den hochmütigen Namen der Toleranz von sich ablehnt, ist selbst aufgeklärt und verdient von der dankbaren Welt und Nachwelt als derjenige gepriesen zu werden, der zuerst das menschliche Geschlecht der Unmündigkeit wenigstens von Seiten der Regierung entschlug und Jedem frei ließ, sich in allem, was Gewissensangelegenheit ist, seiner eigenen Vernunft zu bedienen", *ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>34</sup> "räsonniert, so viel ihr wollt, und worüber ihr wollt; nur, gehorcht!", *ibid.*, p. 41.

As for the other great German romantic author, Friedrich Schiller, we can scarcely find any influence of Ferguson in his works. He read the *Institutes* in his school years, called Ferguson the 'contemporary sage',<sup>35</sup> but the political ideal of his characters is rather republican and revolutionary than liberal. His own ideal is aesthetic and poetic, and in his *Briefe über die aesthetische Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* he maintains that through beauty man makes his own way to freedom. His proposed remedy was therefore aesthetic education, while he is substantially under the influence of Kantian philosophy.<sup>36</sup> This explains the reason why his reception of Fergusonian ideas is in him substantially marginal.

### Concluding remarks

In the above pages a picture has been sketched, as much as possible exhaustive, of the European philosophy between 18th and 19th centuries, i.e., of Enlightenment and Romanticism.

We have moved from the axiom that, while the 18th century is the century of rationalism and materialism, the 19th century theorizes a new concept of the 'history' of human societies: i.e., from the point of view of political philosophy, the concept of their 'historicity'. This means that societies continuously change, and can never remain too long equal to themselves.

In literature the new century, the century of Romanticism, recovers the dimension of interiority, of the sentiment, against the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Hence the almost 'religious' concept of 'peoples', with their own traditions and peculiarities that cannot be modified 'artificially': i.e., according to rules which are not the product of their own history and traditions, but of 'arid' reason.

And Ferguson, although biographically a man of the 18th century, has a romantic sensibility.

*An Essay* was published in 1767, but in it we find fully conceptualized ideas that became current late in the century and early in the 19th century: i.e., with the Romantic movement.

As for the philosopher's inspiration from Stoicism, as said above, this is in him substantially Ciceronianism, with its commitment to political life and to a sense of duty towards one's own country and humankind, in opposition to Epicureanism and Materialism. And Ciceronianism means also the belief in a 'God of all' and, essentially, in incoming Christianity. This is the dimension of Stoicism to be recovered in Ferguson, a dimension that is far from being incompatible with Liberalism and Romanticism. It is in the same line of thought, instead.

As for the so-called republicanism in Ferguson, which is theorized, according to some historians, in *The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic*, one could observe that the historians of Rome constantly praised the virtue of the Republic, certainly not the age of the Emperors, that was traditionally described as the age of vice and debauchery. Praising Republican Rome, Ferguson praised, in reality, 'virtue' which, he maintained, was needed in contemporary age. And contemporary age was the century of commitment to political life through the contests of political parties, well evident in Great Britain of the eighteenth century, and soon to develop vigorously in continental Europe of the next century.

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<sup>35</sup> F. Oz-Salzberger, op. cit. p. 291.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 309.