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El republicanismo clásico y el nacimiento de la sociedad civil moderna

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In this paper, I intend to tackle a series of questions. Firstly, what were the challenges and the problems, due to the emergence of modern civil society, which the thinkers, who referred to the values and institutional solutions of the modern republican tradition, were confronted with? Were the eighteenth century thinkers convinced that the creation of republican institutions and the practice of civil virtue could still be possible in modern commercial societies? Or, to put it in a more concise form, were they persuaded of the possibility of reconciling wealth and virtue? In order to deal with these questions, I will take into account the culture and the debates, which, before me, Leonidas Montes has discussed in his paper. Namely, I will dwell upon some of the formulations of the Scottish Enlightenment, and, in particular, of a thinker, who in many respects remained faithful to the assumptions of the republican tradition: Adam Ferguson. Before taking Ferguson's thought into examination, I will make some introductory remarks on the challenges of the rise of commercial society to 18th century thinkers. Finally, I will attempt to show how some of the questions, which were touched on by the 18th century republican thinkers, are still on our agenda, and which is our task to reformulate in a more adequate language.

Thinkers of the 1750s and 1760s were confronted with impressive transformation processes, or paraphrasing the title of Karl Polanyi's work, with "the Great Transformation". Changes concerned at least three spheres (the economic sphere, the political sphere and the sphere of morals). A) To begin with, they were confronted with the development of a relatively independent economic sphere, characterised by a large social division of labour; the emergence, in certain contexts, of the first factories; the rise of national and international commerce; and the setting up of what has been called the financial revolution, with the birth and proliferation, among other things, of State securities. B) At the same time, those thinkers had to come to terms with the institution of a relatively autonomous public and administrative sphere, and the emergence of the first structures of a modern bureaucratic state – in particular, with the

rise of the fiscal system and the creation of permanent armies. C) Finally, they were confronted with the emergence of new values, which proceeded along with the rise of commercial society: values of refinement and politeness. Especially, they had to deal with the emergence of a new anthropological figure: a man who pursues, in commercial activities as well as in all other spheres of existence, his own private interest; a man driven by *amor sui*, 'self love'.

In other words, we may argue that the thinkers of the 1750's and 1760's had to come to terms with Mandeville's challenge: "private vices, public benefits" is, precisely, the subtitle of *The Fable of the Bees*, with its various editions and enlargements, Mandeville's extraordinary work in progress.

With remarkable insight and capacity for theoretical systematization, Mandeville grasped the key features of the modern commercial societies, or civil societies. He had looked into the mechanisms of social division of labour and wealth production, affirming, among other things, that a multitude of poor men was the condition of the development of modern nations. In the second part of his *Fable*, he had dwelled upon the unprecedented configuration of the modern states; on their structure, which confines each single person to a specific function, thus taking the overall shape of a huge machine. Moreover, he had stressed the fact that the main character of modern societies was a new type of man: an individual in constant pursue of his own interest, and exclusively driven by those passions, which he called, respectively, *self-love* and *self-liking*.

Mandeville had formulated a sharp and unavoidable alternative: in order to allow for commercial activities, wealth and luxury to expand, one must accept the fact that these originate in, and are constantly increased by deep-rooted moral vices. Instead, for moral virtue to prevail, a society must be poor.¹

Mandeville's dilemma has been at the core of the reflections of some of the most subtle and radical 18th century thinkers, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Adam Smith. This dilemma constituted a particular challenge for republican thinkers: at a closer look, Mandeville suggested that modern society needed neither moral virtue, nor that political virtue, dear to republican thinkers.

¹ "Bare Virtue can't make Nations live / in Splendor; they, that would revive/ a Golden Age, must be as free, / For Acorns, as for Honesty."

Moral virtue hindered and interfered with economic development, which was fed by passions usually considered as vicious. Political virtue was not required in a context, in which political power was mainly exercised by impersonal structures and mechanisms.

Let me point out the fact that the challenge, issued by the rise of modern commercial societies, and represented on the theoretical plane by Mandeville's position, made the thinkers, who referred to the values of the republican tradition, feel uneasy for one particular reason, among others. In its various versions, the modern republican tradition had always found it difficult to deal with the problem of economic reproduction, with the growth and the accumulation of different forms of wealth. First of all, let us consider Machiavelli's ambivalent attitude toward the riches. In several passages of his works, he expressed his concern for the accumulation of riches in the hands of private individuals. Machiavelli was afraid of the political consequences of such accumulation of wealth: He was concerned that wealthy people would use these riches to make supporters and "partisans", which they would then dispose of in political conflicts. It is precisely for this reason that he suggested to keep the public rich, and the private persons poor.

Moreover, if one considers the 16th century republicans in Scotland and England, authors such as Harrington and Fletcher had conceived their projects of republics by taking primarily landed property into consideration, thus making the figure of the independent landowner the pivot of their elaborations. What remained unsaid in their federal republics, in their fascinating republican projects, was the acceptance of slavery or, at least, of the subjugation of a large part of the population. The egalitarian republic of free and independent owners was founded on the servile labour of large strata of the population. Servile work was never drawn into question. And the wealth, admitted by 17th century English republicans, was an agrarian wealth, not a commercial and trading one.² The same may be said of the 18th century republican thinkers, among whom we must mention Rousseau. Probably, only a few representatives of the Dutch republicanism, for instance the De la Court brothers, had started to come to terms with the rise of commercial society in the late 17th century.

² We are confronting a republican theory that rested on agrarian and patriarchal assumptions

I will now examine the way in which Adam Ferguson reformulates the legacy of republican ideas confronted with the great transformations of his time. In a first attempt to circumscribe the question, it may be argued that he resorts to these ideas to *criticize* the modern commercial society. In his reflection, republicanism appears as a set of values and ideas, which allow him to consider the various aspects and characters of modern commercial society from a critical perspective.

2.1. Thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, from Hume to Smith and Millar, are often presented as authors who reformulate the language and concepts of the tradition of natural jurisprudence, and who transplant some of the concepts of the tradition of civic humanism, or republican tradition, into such heritage.

At this point it is important to underline that in Scottish thought one can find thinkers who took up the language and concepts of the modern republican tradition without subordinating them to the language and the concepts of other traditions. If in the Edinburgh of the early Eighteenth century it was Andrew Fletcher who creatively recovered the ideas of the republican tradition, in the "Edinburgh of the Age of Reason" it was above all Adam Ferguson who carried out an analogous operation. Thus, Ferguson was described, with good reason, by George Davie as "that most Machiavellian of Scottish thinkers", and John Pocock considered the *Essay on the History of Civil Society* as "perhaps the most Machiavellian of the Scottish disquisitions".

One may admit that in other texts - for instance in the edited versions of his university courses and in the political pamphlets - Ferguson also made use of conceptual distinctions that were typical of natural jurisprudence and had recourse to them to support his contingent positions. But there is no doubt that his thought, especially in his most important work, the *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, is characterized by a systematic employment of categories that belong to the republican tradition, from the concept of virtue to that of corruption.

The *Essay on the History of Civil Society* may be considered as one of the first examples of a new literary genre: Ferguson's reflection may be inscribed in what the Scottish would later call the *theoretical history*, and the French the *histoire raisonnée*. Adam Ferguson discusses the dilemmas of commercial society in the framework

provided by an original "theoretical or conjectural history," to use the expression coined by Dugald Stewart. The categories of the republican tradition allow Ferguson to structure his conjectural history of humanity, or more precisely, to give a significant turn to it.

In elaborating his conjectural history of mankind, Ferguson creatively employs and merges two great paradigms of historical reconstruction and interpretation. On the one hand, in order to trace the development of society "from rudeness to civilization", Ferguson uses an approach based on historical stages similar to that which was worked out by other Scottish thinkers on the basis of ethnographic materials and concepts drawn from the natural law tradition, from Locke to Pufendorf. On the other hand, he uses the historical scheme of rise, greatness and decadence, whose paradigm is the history of Rome - found in many republican thinkers, from Machiavelli to Montesquieu. A large part of the *Essay on the History of Civil Society* appears as an investigation into the possibilities of corruption, decline, crisis, which are present in all human societies, and in particular in modern ones. The key-terms used by Ferguson are *corruption*, *public spirit*, *national spirit*, *despotism* – terms, which had entered the republican language, or which had been declined with a particular meaning by the republican thinkers.

In this way, Ferguson manages to formulate a conception of history that is remarkably non-deterministic. The future of the "polished and commercial societies" can be either freedom or despotism: in these societies, one finds contradictory tendencies and factors, which may lead to radically opposite outcomes. The problem is to identify the pathologies of the modern world and to see whether, and how, it is possible provide a remedy.

Ferguson's attitude towards modern civil society is ambivalent: he accepts and criticizes it at the same time. Overall, Ferguson accepts the new mechanisms of production of wealth, starting with the division of labour in manufacture. However, he criticizes the values and the ethos, that accompanies the "great transformation". Above all, he is critical of the politics that has asserted itself in modern societies: a politics that is run by a few professionals and that surrenders the defence of freedom to institutional procedures and to professional armies.

2.2. Ferguson resorts to the categories of the republican tradition, as well as to build the conceptual framework of his history, more specifically, in order to develop a critical examination of his present time, that of modern commercial societies. In his view, the «Polished and Commercial Nations» are characterised by an extensive social division of labour. The modern world appears to him as an «age of separations», with the rise of a sphere of society, separated and autonomous from the sphere of the State, and in which each sphere is animated by a constant process of division of tasks and functions.

Let us now consider how Ferguson presents the main features of that economic sphere, which became independent in modern societies. As I suggested, Ferguson considers the social division of labour as a typical trait of modern commercial societies. He notes that in these societies men are impelled by a "sense of utility", to endlessly subdivide their occupations. The Scot notes with concern this proliferation of new "arts" and "professions", whose consequence is the specialization of each individual in a particular activity: "Every craft may ingross the whole of a man's attention, and has a mystery which must be studied or learned by a regular apprenticeship. Nations of tradesmen come to consist of members who, beyond their own trade, are ignorant of all human affairs".

Ferguson's analysis is not limited to these considerations on the social division of labour, but proceeds to examine the consequences of the technical division of the functions in manufacture. His critical remarks on the impoverishment of the human faculties of the subordinated workers induced by the division of labour in the great "machine" of manufacture are well known. Here we can just point out the most penetrating passage -- one which has often been recalled since Marx-- of this analysis of the dehumanizing effects of the technical division of functions: "Many mechanical arts, indeed, require no capacity; they succeed best under a total suppression of sentiment and reason; and ignorance is the mother of industry as well as of superstition. Reflection and fancy are subject to err; but a habit of moving the hand, or the foot, is independent of either. Manufactures, accordingly, prosper most, where the mind is least consulted, and where the workshop may, without any great effort of imagination, be considered as an engine the parts of which are men".

Ferguson offers a lucid description of power relations within the economic sphere, where new forms of subordination and inequality are established. He points out that "in

every commercial state, notwithstanding any pretension to equal rights, the exaltation of a few must depress the many”³.

These considerations on the consequences of the division of labour on the human integrity of the subordinated workers and on society as a whole -- undoubtedly very acute for those years -- should not obscure the fact that Ferguson essentially judges this process of "Separation of Arts and Professions" as a positive one, regarding it as irreversible. In the same sections of the *Essay*, which have just been analysed, he clearly specifies that the subdivision of labour in the productive sphere is to be considered a beneficial change, to be fully embraced because it unlocks sources of wealth to nations, and primes a process of continuous economic growth: "By the separation of arts and professions, the sources of wealth are laid open; every species of material is wrought up to the greatest perfection, and every commodity is produced in the greatest abundance".

On the whole, Ferguson accepts the sort of agricultural and manufacturing development brought on by the advent of "commercial society", and has no nostalgia for the forms of economic reproduction characteristic of previous ages. The author of the *Essay* appropriates some fundamental values and key ideas of the republican tradition without adopting the socio-economic solutions championed by the Commonwealthmen in the decades at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth. Ferguson's republicanism is intended for commercial societies, not for the agricultural societies envisaged by Harrington.

Ferguson realizes the importance of the economic transformations which had occurred in the modern world and describes them with the aid of concepts developed by writers who, in many cases, are very distant from the republican tradition. It may be recalled that he also inserts in his reflections certain laissez faire theses, to use an anachronism, cherished by the supporters of the "natural" development of modern

³ According to Ferguson, the more the capacity to use intellectual energies and to understand the work's ends declines among the large majority of men, the more it concentrates in a small minority of individuals. Such phenomenon takes place both in the manufacture and in the State apparatus, confirming the analogy between the two processes of division of labour: "But if many parts in the practice of every art, and in the detail of every department, require no abilities, or actually tend to contract and to limit the views of the mind, there are others which lead to general reflections, and to enlargement of thought. Even in manufacture, the genius of the master, perhaps, is cultivated, while that of the inferior workman lies waste. The statesman may have a wide comprehension of human affairs, while the tools he employs are ignorant of the system in which they are themselves combined. The general officer may be a great proficient in the knowledge of war, while the soldier is confined to a few motions of the hand and foot" E p. 183.

societies. He notes that the statesman must not intervene, with his "active hand", in the sphere of economic reproduction: "When the refined politician would lend an active hand, he only multiplies interruptions and grounds of complaint". However, Ferguson is not interested in investigating the mechanisms of development of the new commercial society in the way that Adam Smith, say, or Sir James Steuart are. His objective is rather to mark the limits of economic relations within social relations as a whole - to determine the correct space which the economy should have in a modern society. For Ferguson, the sphere of economic reproduction is important but it is not everything. Certainly, the political sphere is far more crucial - the sphere which allows citizens to take part in collective affairs and determine the destiny of the *res publica*. Ferguson is very explicit on this point. Proposing a tendentious reading of the Political Economy of his times, he suggests: "Speculations on commerce and wealth have been delivered by the ablest writers, who have left nothing so important to be offered on the subject, as the general caution, not to consider these articles as making the sum of national felicity, or the principal object of any state"⁴. Wealth and commerce should not be considered as "the principal object of any state", nor as the key-elements of "national felicity". Instead, national felicity ensues from the participation of all citizens to the political sphere, as many classical republicans asserted. It is from this firm belief that Ferguson develops his analysis of the "Corruption incident to Polished Nations". Corruption is not portrayed as a necessary consequence of the economic transformations of modern societies, but rather as the result of the concurrent transformations in the political domain. We shall now take into examination the way in which Ferguson presents the main characters of the modern sphere of the State, as well as his criticism of the division of labour, which constitutes such sphere, leaving its profound mark in it.

Ferguson's criticism is directed, in the first place, against that form of social division of labour which separates the citizen from the soldier and gives the soldier the status of a distinct profession. With this division of labour, "the keeping and the enjoyment of liberty" are committed "to different hands". Ferguson sees the separation

⁴ This is a point which Ferguson stresses repeatedly. In another section of the *Essay*, he observes: "Wealth, commerce, extent of the territory and the knowledge of the arts, are, when properly employed, the means of preservation, and the foundation of power. (...) Their tendency is to maintain numbers of men, not to constitute happiness. They will accordingly maintain the wretched, as well as the happy. They answer one purpose, but are not sufficient for all; and are of little significance, when only employed to maintain a timid, dejected, and servile people"

"between the soldier and the pacific citizen" as marking the origins of modern commercial society, as the starting point of an ever-widening gulf between the economic and the political sphere, between society and state.

In the second place, Ferguson's criticism is directed against the division of labour in the state apparatus, between those who hold the political power and those who hold the military power. Lastly, he criticizes the division of labour which places the direction of the state in the hands of clerks and accountants, who follow routine procedures while losing sight of the political meaning of their acts. For similar reasons, he protests against the division of labour that transforms the army into a body of professional soldiers, who are perfectly disciplined but no longer aware of the reasons why they are fighting, and with very little military virtue. Stating this in contemporary words, what Ferguson criticizes repeatedly and in a thorough-going fashion is the parallel establishment of a professional army and of a bureaucratic state apparatus. In other words, the emergence of the professional politician alongside to the professional soldier. It is clear that this kind of criticism is rooted in the republican ideal of the soldier-citizen, the citizen who participates in public life and, sometimes, -via the rotation of posts- assumes responsibility for of its direction.

This criticism of standing armies and professional politicians forms a constant theme in Ferguson's thought. It is introduced for the first time in his *Reflections previous to the Establishment of a Militia*, a pamphlet pleading for the establishment of a popular militia in Scotland, and it is amply debated in various pages of the *Essay*. It likewise stands out as one of the leading themes of the *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic*, published in 1783. Here, Ferguson argues that the specialization which divided citizens from soldiers and caused the separation between political and military responsibilities was a prime cause of the Republic's collapse. Criticism of standing armies, support for the militia and for a participative concept of politics are again prominent in the lectures of moral philosophy given by Ferguson in the 1770s and in the 1780s, as well as in other essays from the 1790s which remained unpublished for a long time. Thus, Ferguson repropose with conviction the civic-humanistic ideal of the citizen-soldier: he maintains that military virtue should be the other side of civil virtue, and he presents the militia as the only type of army capable of resisting the external enemies without threatening civil liberty internally.

When politics is put in the hands of professionals and when bureaucracy prevails, freedom is at risk, both from the outside and from the inside. The state may be invaded by foreign armies: a state that is defended only by a professional army and not also by a militia is in reality a weak state. And especially a state apparatus made up of professionals, of clerks and accountants, may be an instrument of despotic policies or open the doors to despotism. "Such a State, like that of China, by throwing affairs into separate offices, where conduct consists in detail, and the observance of forms, by superseding all the exertion of a great and liberal mind, is more akin to despotism than we are apt to think".

Strictly speaking, Ferguson did not see corruption as solely the result of the institutional and political transformations which led to the establishment of a standing army and of a bureaucratic state. He also saw it as the result of the political ideologies which, from Defoe to Smith, had accompanied and supported such transformations by emphasizing the superiority of standing armies over militias, and by championing the private sphere as the primary field for individual self-fulfilment in modern society, as opposed to the public sphere of political participation. Ferguson proves to be a strenuous opponent of these ideologies. He fiercely attacks the praise of retirement, of shutting oneself off in the private sphere. He writes for example: "The care of mere fortune is supposed to constitute wisdom: retirement from public affairs and real indifference to mankind receive the applauses of moderation and virtue". And he severely adds: "Our considering mere retirement, therefore, as a symptom of moderation, and of virtue, (...) proceeds from an habit of thinking which appears fraught with moral corruption, from our considering public life as a scene for the gratification of mere vanity, avarice and ambition; never as furnishing the best opportunity for a just and happy engagement of the mind and the heart".

As will by now be obvious, what Ferguson values is participation in public affairs and devotion to public life, even though this participation will be conflictual in character. There are plenty of passages in the *Essay* and in the *Principles*, where Ferguson truly sings the praises of conflict. From a conceptual perspective similar to that of Machiavelli in the *Discorsi*, Ferguson devotes many pages of his *Essay* and *Principles* to elaborate a real praise of conflict, going as far as writing that «He who has never struggled with his fellow-creatures, is a stranger to half the sentiments of

mankind». Citizens disagree and fight for their opinions; they congregate in political parties and oppose each other over the political decisions to be taken at the state level. Political communities are constantly in a state of reciprocal strain: Ferguson also emphasized the positive role played by emulation between states and sometimes even by war. Freedom can only emerge from conflict between virtuous citizens; political order is defined as that which allows the emergence of these differences and dissonances and then synthesizes them at a higher level. What stifles freedom is the "tranquillity" and the "unanimity" that prevail in modern societies, where the citizen neglects public affairs and entrusts the safeguard of his freedom to professional politicians and to the institutional mechanism of the "rule of law": "When we seek in society for the order of mere inaction and tranquillity, we forget the nature of our subject, and we find the order of slaves, not that of free men".

We next need to investigate the reasons that induced Ferguson to praise the conflictual participation of citizens, the reasons that lead him to value positively even animosity among parties, which had been such a great concern for Hume. Ferguson claims that freedom cannot be preserved in modern commercial nations by mere recourse to laws or to institutional mechanisms. Neither "the government of laws", nor the separation of powers are sufficient. Ferguson insists that what is necessary is the "influence of men resolved to be free": that is the firm determination of each citizen not to entrust his destiny to somebody's else. The participation of citizens is needed both when laws are being formulated and when they are being enforced. Ferguson emphasizes in particular this last aspect, and he writes: "if forms of proceedings, written statutes, or rather constituents of law, cease to be enforced by the very spirit from which they arose, they serve only to cover, not to restrain, the iniquities of power". This is one of Ferguson's fundamental beliefs, and he comes back to it repeatedly in the *Essay*, particularly in the passage where he reminds us that "the most equitable laws on paper are consistent with the upmost despotism in administration".

Ferguson's approach is thus very different from that of Hume and Smith. Simplifying, we may state that for the safeguard of freedom they both relied much more on institutional mechanisms than on citizens' participation. As Donald Winch has pointed out, Hume's and Smith's politics "relied more on machinery, than men; (...) government [was] seen largely as a matter of balancing, checking and harnessing

interests rather than calling forth public spirit and virtue". Ferguson's contrasting emphasis [on virtue and public spirit, rather than on institutional arrangements,] distinguishes his approach not only from Hume's and Smith's, but also from that of various other republican thinkers, among whom Harrington is the most important.

Let me add a remark. Ferguson endorsed Hume's and Smith's denunciation of the fictions of social contract and ancient legislators, but he did this in order to shift the balance of intentional effective intervention in history from heroes to citizens, not in order to diminish the role of human action in history. Ferguson recognizes the fact that in past human history, unintentional processes took place, which produced unintended consequences. He points out, for instance, that «nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design». But there is a crucial difference between the past and the future: one should not take the Hayekian simplifying interpretations of these passages over.

Whatever the distant origin of political institutions and the set of conventions which guided their creation may have been, the important thing is that the safeguard of freedom is not entrusted exclusively to the institutional mechanisms, but to the citizens' ever active virtue, and to their constantly vigilant public spirit.

The crucial difference between unintended and cumulative generation of political structures and the deliberate action vital for their preservation is proclaimed in the *Essay*, sharply distancing Ferguson from Hume and Smith: "Although free constitutions of government seldom or never take their rise from the scheme of any single projector, yet are they often preserved by the vigilance, activity, and zeal of single men".

This brings us to a difficult question: who, according to Ferguson, deserves the status of citizen? Is this status reserved for the higher ranks of society, or is it open to all the inhabitants of commercial societies, even those engaged in the most humanly degrading occupations? Clearly, the virtue to which he refers, political and military at one and the same time, rules out participation by women. Beyond this point, however, it is again difficult to find a univocal answer. Ferguson points out that "men whose dispositions are sordid, and whose ordinary applications are illiberal" are "unfit to command". He rhetorically asks: "How can he who has confined his views to his own subsistence or preservation be intrusted with the conduct of nations?". But he does not

elaborate further, and he gives no definite specifications. His call for virtue seems to be addressed mainly to the higher ranks of society, yet he does not seem to believe that individuals engaged in commerce and manufacturing were, per se, incapable of showing true public spirit.

Harrington had identified as a precondition for virtue that citizens should also be landowners. Only an *oikos* based on landownership could guarantee the citizen's independence, and allow him to practice his political and military virtue. This material precondition for independence, which Fletcher still assumed as necessary, seems to have been abandoned by Ferguson, who suggest that merchants, manufacturers and even some type of workers in modern societies can and ought to exercise the full range of civic virtues. It must be admitted, however, that Ferguson does not specify which institutions should allow them to practice their virtue. He clearly claims that citizens must recover their military virtue, by taking part in militias organized on a territorial basis. He also claims that they must not devote themselves only to private matters, but must take an interest in public life by using whatever institutional opportunities are made available by the government under which they happen to be living [by their government].

At this juncture we need to ask what, according to Ferguson, are the prerequisites of the individual's independence. It can be argued that Ferguson believed Man could remain substantially uninfluenced by external circumstances, and hence that independence must be based not on material, but on spiritual premises. Ferguson had read the ancient Stoics and in particular Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius thoroughly. He believed that modern men can likewise avoid being dominated by their passions and living at the mercy of the forces which seem to govern the external world. They do not have to submit to the dictates of personal interest and can resist being moulded by the forces that rule the modern market economy. Thus Ferguson emphasized the role played by will, by the capacity for choice present in every man, even in those men who happen to live in the "polished and commercial nations". Such a capacity for choice represents the basis of their capacity for resistance and their virtuous conduct.

To sum up, if we look at Ferguson's theoretical proposal from a distance, he seems to have wanted to reconcile commerce and virtue, to bring together the new mode of production centred on the division of labour with a politics based on some

cardinal values of the republican tradition. Commerce does not appear as a principle that necessarily dissolves political and military virtue. Virtue can still be practiced in the age of separations, in modern commercial societies of the modern world. While accepting the economic realities of the modern commercial society, Ferguson refused to abandon the essentially voluntary, activist, citizen-dependent and historically non determinist dimensions of the classical republic.

3. *Questions for our present times. Some concluding remarks.*

Some of Ferguson's positions can still provide the material for a contemporary rethinking of republicanism, for a republican theory which is up to the present. I will try to enumerate some of them.

1. How to think dependence and domination today? As I suggested, Ferguson devoted a particular attention to the division of labour carried out in the economic sphere. He considered the division of labour not just as a possibility of economic development, but also as a threat, entailing the risk of dismembering the human character. Ferguson traced the new power relations, which imposed themselves in commercial societies, and wrote: "The exaltation of the few must depress the many". But we must admit the fact that, once he had pointed out the de-humanizing consequences of the division of labour on subordinated workers, he did not prove to be actively concerned by them. He did not propose, for instance, like Adam Smith in the fifth book of the *Wealth of Nations*, the intervention of the state for their education. His proposal of an active citizenship is essentially directed to the higher ranks of society. There is an elitist dimension in his formulations as well.

How to think dependence today, how to thematize domination, while taking the distance from the elitist assumptions, which are present in many modern republican theories? If it is our intention to conceive freedom as absence of domination, the analysis of the old and the new forms of domination, in the economic and social sphere, is still to be carried out to a large extent. Many pages of this analysis are still awaiting to be written.

2. How to think independence today? Ferguson suggests to keep wealth and virtue, the acceptance of the social division of labour and the experience of republican virtue together. This means that, compared with seventeenth century theorist, he has changed the way of thinking the preconditions of political virtue, and of thematizing independence, one of the key-values of the republican tradition. As I suggested, in Ferguson's view, independence must be based on spiritual rather than material premises. I wonder whether many contemporary theories, which repropose the possibility of an active citizenship of the republican type, move from a perspective which is similar to Ferguson's. That is to say, I wonder how independence and the preconditions for political virtue should be conceived today. In other words, how is it possible for citizens to be virtuous and capable of actively watch over their representatives' choices and actions in a democracy, which is open to dispute/dissent? What does virtuous citizenship depend on? Is it possible to conceive independence and virtue as abilities, which are always accessible to the individuals; or spiritual independence should, so to speak, be "created" through an unremitting work on ourselves? Should the citizen be conceived as a sort of centaur engaged half in the economic sphere of divided and parcelled labour – thus, submitted to its forms of domination and absence of freedom - and half in the political sphere – where, the citizen has to take the totality into account, and which allows him to develop other human qualities, and experience freedom more easily? Or rather, is virtue, namely, the possibility of political action, even to contest the representatives, to remain the prerogative or property of the elites?

3. How to think old and new forms of de-politicization?

In past human history, unintentional processes have taken place, human institutions have been the result of human action, although not the execution of human design. Nonetheless, in our present day the preservation of those institutions, which preserve freedom, is committed exclusively to men's active vigilance. It is vain and dangerous to rely on unintentional processes and hope in something similar to an invisible hand to secure freedom and hold the threat of despotism back. In Ferguson's view, the invisible hand worked only in the economic sphere, not in the

political one. As we have seen, Ferguson is a critic of retirement, of those ideologies, which affirm the primacy of individual fulfilment in the private sphere. He conceived the praise of the private sphere and the market, as well as the indiscriminate praise of unintended consequences and of the invisible hand, as exhortations to political passiveness, and dangerous elements of de-politicization. From this perspective, our contemporary world does not seem too distant from Ferguson's, and the value of his criticism seems to live out his time. But other discourses of de-politicization are being brought about, which aim at limiting, or even removing the autonomy and independence of contemporary citizens, for instance, in the name of religion and of those ethics which proceed from theological premises. Maybe, those who are concerned with bringing forms of republican freedom to life again in our present time, should consider not only those discourses centered on the market and the invisible hand, but the other, often more indirect exhortations to de-politicization and passivity as well.