

Home » Publications » E-seminars in history

## The Scottish Contribution to the Enlightenment

John Robertson, St Hugh's College, University of Oxford  
1997

The Scottish Enlightenment was only born as a distinct subject of scholarship between thirty and forty years ago. The exact date of birth is uncertain, because paternity, or at least credit for the name, was promptly disputed by Hugh Trevor-Roper and the late Duncan Forbes. Their dispute was enlivened by obvious differences of style and tone - they certainly made the most of it; but its keenness always belied the extent to which the protagonists' conceptions of the new subject were complementary. Forbes developed his account in a series of studies of Hume and Smith, culminating in *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (1975); but even more important was the Special Subject which he offered in Cambridge in the 1960s. Entitled "Hume, Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment" in order to be accepted by a Faculty sceptical of the existence of the Scottish Enlightenment as such, this attracted Quentin Skinner, Nicholas Phillipson, and many others: it was to be seminal not only for the Scottish Enlightenment, but for the whole renaissance of intellectual history in Britain since the 1960s. [1] As the title of the course indicates, Forbes's Scottish Enlightenment was an intellectual movement to which others besides Hume and Smith had made important contributions, and which had concentrated upon the understanding of society and its development; it was also a cosmopolitan movement, whose frame of reference extended well beyond Britain. A similar conception informed Trevor-Roper's interpretative sketch of the Scottish Enlightenment as a whole, in his address to the Enlightenment Conference of 1966 in St Andrews, published in the following year. Stimulated both by the opening-up of eighteenth-century Scotland to new ideas from continental Europe and by their country's experience of unusually rapid economic and social development, Trevor-Roper argued, the Scottish thinkers had made common intellectual cause in exploring what they termed 'the progress of society'. [2]

That the Scottish Enlightenment of Forbes and Trevor-Roper belonged within the wider European Enlightenment was confirmed (if not anticipated) by the Italian historian, Franco Venturi. Himself committed to a conception of the Enlightenment in which Italian illuministi were as much participants as French philosophes, Venturi immediately extended a welcome to the Scots. In his address to the Eleventh Congress of the Historical Sciences in 1960, and again in the Trevelyan Lectures at Cambridge in 1969 (published as *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* in 1971), Venturi pointed up the contrast between the England which repudiated John Wilkes and the Scotland which supported David Hume and Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson and John Millar. Together, Venturi argued, these Scots had formed a nascent 'intelligentsia', such as existed in Paris, but was quite unknown in London. It was in Scotland that the essential elements of the Enlightenment were to be found: a backward and a modern world existing in close chronological and geographical proximity, along with patriotic groups and societies concentrating attention on economic and social problems. A 'comprehensive study' of the Scottish Enlightenment had accordingly become one of the most necessary pieces of research in eighteenth-century European history. [3]

Venturi's Enlightenment was a single intellectual movement, whose adherents were spread throughout the European world, and were committed both to understanding and to furthering the modernisation of society. It combined hard, original thinking with a keen sense of the opportunities offered by increasingly enterprising publishers for the propagation of its ideas; and its proponents were typically both cosmopolitans, willing participants in the exchange of ideas across political frontiers, and patriots, devoted to the improvement of their own societies. Only occasionally were they in a position of authority from which to implement the reforms they advocated; but they were close to the centre of public life in their communities. (Venturi's Enlightenment was not a movement 'on the margins'.) To Venturi, as to Forbes and Trevor-Roper, what joined the Scots to this movement was their preoccupation with the progress of society, as the unifying theme of their enquiries and as the favoured objective of their own society. The Scottish philosophers may not have had to campaign as hard as their French or Italian counterparts in the face of injustice or religious persecution; the Enlightenment in Scotland may not have ended in revolution. Nevertheless, recognition of the Scottish contribution to the Enlightenment was powerful reinforcement of the Enlightenment's claim to have laid the intellectual foundations of the modern world.

Thirty years after its formulation, such a view of the Enlightenment, and of the Scottish contribution to it, is much more difficult to sustain. The difficulty is not simply the result of the frontal assault launched by the philosophies of postmodernism, for which the Enlightenment was the false prophet of the delusive values of rationalism and universality. The post-modern critique has intersected with other trends in historical scholarship, whose exponents have more or less wittingly assisted in undermining the earlier view of the Enlightenment. Three such trends can be separated out (although of course they are likely to be combined, in varying measures, in the work of any individual scholar).

One has been the natural tendency of scholarship to discover that what were once thought of as original, or at least distinctive, features of the Enlightenment were already in existence in earlier periods. An awareness of the opportunities offered by print for an alliance between intellectual and commercial enterprise existed well before the Enlightenment, as did a self-consciously international 'republic of letters'. [4] Still more marked, it can be argued, are the intellectual continuities. The Enlightenment invented no new field of intellectual enquiry, and even its most characteristic intellectual concerns - the conflict between self-interest and sociability, the transformation of society and politics wrought by the growth of commerce - were being discussed in the seventeenth century, if not earlier.

A second trend in Enlightenment studies has been towards inclusiveness. Not only have the geographical frontiers of the Enlightenment been extended to the furthest edges of Europe and the European world (a tendency to which Venturi himself gave the lead); but the association of the Enlightenment with a specific set of intellectual interests has been diluted, while the ranks of those involved as participants have steadily been enlarged. To the long-standing claims of literature to belong to Enlightenment studies have been added those of the natural sciences and the arts, while the printers and booksellers on whom the philosophers depended are increasingly recognised as participants in the Enlightenment in their own right. In many cases such inclusiveness simply reflects a liberal reluctance to exclude; but the tendency to treat all ideas as if they were intellectually equivalent, a tendency apparently characteristic of cultural history, now threatens to deprive the Enlightenment of any intellectual coherence.

A third tendency in Enlightenment studies has followed from the first two. As the continuities with previous periods attract more attention, while its scope is constantly extended, the differences within what was once taken to be a unitary, cohesive Enlightenment become ever more apparent. Increasingly it is thought desirable to distinguish varieties of Enlightenment. A Catholic, mostly southern European Enlightenment is to be distinguished from the Protestant, northern Enlightenment. Still more popular, especially among anglophone scholars, has been the approach to the Enlightenment in its national contexts. Brought into focus by the volume edited under that title by Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, [5] the approach has encouraged research into the interaction of

Enlightenment ideas with local circumstances and intellectual traditions; but as these national differences are accentuated, the wider Enlightenment tends to slip from view. The once-unified movement of the Enlightenment is rapidly fragmenting.

Nowhere, perhaps, has the potential of the national context approach to the Enlightenment been better displayed than in the case of Scotland. The subject of one of the best essays in Porter & Teich's volume, by Nicholas Phillipson, [6] the Scottish Enlightenment has benefited from an explosion of scholarship since the 1970s, the greater part of which has been shaped by this approach. In turn, the approach has encouraged the two other trends noticeable in recent Enlightenment scholarship. There has been a new emphasis on continuities with earlier periods of Scottish intellectual history, opening up the intellectual life of the hitherto neglected later seventeenth century, and even seeking connections with the older intellectual movements of Humanism and late Scholasticism, of which Scots had once been such distinguished exponents. The scope for extending the Enlightenment to include other contemporary fields of intellectual activity has likewise been seized upon by historians of science, who have drawn attention to the promptness with which Scots took up Newtonianism, and to the continued, widespread Scottish interest in the natural sciences throughout the eighteenth century. In this and other ways the approach to the Enlightenment in national context has done much to enlarge our understanding of eighteenth-century Scottish intellectual life. But the national orientation of such scholarship has also tended to isolate the Scots from the wider Enlightenment. In so far as this has been resisted, moreover, it has been by aligning Scottish with English intellectual life, and discounting Venturi's sharp contrast between them. Encouraged by the national context approach to discover Enlightenment even in England, John Pocock and others have associated the Scots with the English in a common British Enlightenment. [7] From here it seems only natural to distinguish the Scottish from the Continental European Enlightenment, and even to hold up the supposedly conservative scepticism of the Scots as an alternative to the radical, rationalist Enlightenment of the philosophes. There was really no such thing, Pocock has reassured us, as 'the' Enlightenment.

By now my own view of these tendencies in recent Enlightenment scholarship should be clear. I think that they have overrun their course. Like Margaret Jacob, [8] if on different terms, I wish to reaffirm the unity of the Enlightenment as an intellectual movement, and more specifically, to restate a version of the original view of the Scottish contribution to it. I shall make this case in two parts. First and more briefly, I shall consider the implications of recent work on the social status, professional careers and public roles of those Scottish men of letters who identified with the Enlightenment. Second, I shall review what I still take to be the central intellectual preoccupations of these thinkers: moral philosophy, the writing of history, and political economy. Despite critical differences between them, differences which have if anything been under-appreciated, I shall argue that the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment were unified by the commitment to human betterment in this world as the measure of progress, and to investigating the conditions of its achievement. But the nature of the Scots' contribution to the Enlightenment as a whole would be still clearer, I shall end by suggesting, if to existing studies were now added others which connected and compared the ideas and achievements of the Enlightenment in Scotland with those of the Enlightenment elsewhere.

## II

It was the assumption of the first historians of the Scottish Enlightenment that its adherents formed a small, distinct group of men of letters, who had sufficiently detached themselves from the conventions of their own society to identify with the wider movement of the Enlightenment at large. To Franco Venturi this meant that the Scots, like the philosophes, already formed an 'intelligentsia' in the original, nineteenth-century sense of the term. Since then, however, a great deal of work by Roger Emerson, Richard Sher and others has made us much better informed about the social status and public role of eighteenth-century Scottish men of letters; how far do those initial assumptions need to be reviewed?

With one notable exception (to which I shall return) all those who associated themselves with the Enlightenment made successful careers in one or more of the three institutions at the centre of Scottish public life: the Universities, the Church, and the Law. Increasingly open to intellectual innovation, the universities offered one of the most congenial, and in many cases lucrative, forms of employment available to men of letters. The gradual replacement of the traditional system of teaching by 'regents' or generalist tutors by the creation of designated chairs in specific subjects made it possible for the new professors to concentrate on the development of their specialisms, and positively to attract students to their courses, to their own and their universities' financial benefit. [9] A similarly secure, if less lucrative career could be made in the Church of Scotland. Clerical orders might make it more difficult publicly to express heterodox religious views, but they were otherwise no bar to pursuing this-worldly intellectual interests. This was especially true in Edinburgh, where the 'Moderate' clergy, led by William Robertson, provoked controversy over patronage, but successfully avoided it in theology. [10] The position was less easy in Glasgow, where the guardians of Presbyterian orthodoxy remained on the alert for the first half of the century; and later John Witherspoon led a lively counterattack on Moderatism. The third profession to support men of letters in eighteenth-century Scotland was the law. It was not as open as either the universities or the Kirk, since entry to the higher levels of the legal profession, as advocates and judges, was effectively restricted to the sons of landowners. [11] Even so, the presence of men of letters within a profession so closely connected to the landed elite facilitated their acceptance more generally by the upper ranks of Scottish society.

Integrated into the existing structure of society by the professions which employed them, the men of letters further consolidated their position by participation in the informal, voluntary associations of "polite" urban culture, the clubs and societies which multiplied in Scotland as everywhere in enlightened Europe. In several cases - the Select Society of Edinburgh, the Glasgow Literary Society, the Aberdeen Philosophical Society - these were deliberately constituted to ensure that men of letters were on at least an equal footing with the landed, legal and merchant members. [12] In others, notably the Poker Club, the relationship was positively familiar, literati and gentry meeting convivially for dinner. What Scotland's cities did not foster were salons - or any equivalent of the Parisian *salonnières*: women, alas, seem to have played almost no role in the Enlightenment in Scotland. It is possible that Freemasonry offered an alternative opportunity for social integration; but despite pioneering work on the origins of Freemasonry in seventeenth-century Scotland, [13] we still know almost nothing about its appeal in the eighteenth century.

Nevertheless, there were limits to the integration of men of letters within Scottish society. These were best exposed by David Hume, whose career became an exemplary lesson in enforced intellectual independence. Having withdrawn from Scotland to France to educate himself as a philosopher, Hume returned in 1739 with the *Treatise of Human Nature*, and the apparent expectation that a university career would follow when a suitable chair became vacant. But when he applied for the Edinburgh chair of Moral Philosophy in 1745, he found himself debarred by an overwhelming coalition of academic, clerical and political interests; and a suggestion that he apply for a chair in Glasgow in 1752 was discounted even by his friend Adam Smith. The intellectual reasons for his exclusion I shall come to shortly; its practical consequences were that he was obliged to accept from his patrons a series of short-term appointments, the most satisfactory of which were in military or diplomatic service, since they enabled him to travel. [14] Of necessity, Hume set himself to earn his own living as an independent man of letters, an ambition finally realised through the success of the *History of England*. The experience clearly left Hume ambivalent. He was always anxious to avoid public controversy, whether with the Kirk or with fellow men of letters; equally, however, he enjoyed and increasingly made a point of his intellectual independence.

No other Scottish man of letters had independence thus forced upon him; but several clearly saw and sought out its attractions. Adam Smith abruptly gave up his chair in 1764 for a tutorship and the prospect of travel with a pension thereafter - effectively a research fellowship for life; his later decision to take an office in the Customs appears to have compromised only his time. Adam Ferguson fought a long battle in the 1770s to secure leave from his chair to travel in Europe and North America. Collectively, moreover, the men of letters were careful to ensure that their acceptance by the landed and legal elite was accompanied by respect for their own expertise, framing the rules of their societies with this in mind. They also maintained their own connections with

continental correspondents and learned societies, clearly regarding themselves as members of the common European republic of letters. They may have been too well integrated into Scottish society for it to be helpful to characterise them as an intelligentsia, as Venturi suggested; but they possessed an independence and standing as men of letters not radically dissimilar from that enjoyed by Enlightenment philosophers in France, Italy or Germany.

Study of the public role adopted by Scottish men of letters tends to reinforce the impression of a measure of detachment from their social setting. Surprisingly, perhaps, historians of the Scottish Enlightenment have so far paid little attention to Habermas' identification of the Enlightenment with the emergence of a new 'public sphere' in eighteenth-century societies; but it may be particularly applicable to the Scottish case. [15] Excluded from parliamentary politics by the narrowness of the franchise and living at a distance from the capital, Scottish men of letters could contribute to public debate at the centre without directly involving themselves in party politics or the formulation of government policy. Conversely, the distance of central government from Scotland enabled the men of letters to generate public debate within Scotland without immediate reference to government. An example might be the repeated agitations for a Scottish militia from the 1760s to the 1780s: though given focus by demands for legislation, these were treated by the Moderate literati who publicised them as an opportunity for a much broader discussion of the place of martial values in an improving society. [16]

But the detachment of the Scottish men of letters is perhaps most marked in relation to the cause of economic improvement itself. On the Continent those who interested themselves in economic affairs were either official agents of government, as in Germany, or, as in Italy, they were reformers actively seeking to persuade their governments to take responsibility for their subjects' economic welfare. In Scotland the issues associated with improvement were repeatedly discussed in the voluntary societies which brought men of letters and landowners together, and these in turn generated other societies, like the Gordon's Mill Farming Club in Aberdeen, intended to address its practical requirements. But none of the leading members of the Scottish Enlightenment (with the exception of the eccentric Sir James Steuart) ever specifically addressed the problems of the Scottish economy, or served on any of the semi-public bodies established to promote particular projects, such as the development of the Highlands. These tasks were left to a second rank of publicists and improvers, headed by James Anderson and Sir John Sinclair. The relative detachment of the theorists was no doubt encouraged by the integration of the Scottish economy into a single British common market, and by the government's limited aspirations to an economic policy. But by the third quarter of the century the Scots were also in the fortunate position of observing an increasingly successful process of economic transformation: it was in the 1760s and 1770s, Scottish economic historians continue to tell us, that agriculture began visibly to be revolutionised in the lowlands, manufactures spread in rural areas, and Glasgow and its hinterland boomed. [17] Freed from direct responsibility for its achievement, the leaders of the Scottish Enlightenment, it may be thought, had every opportunity for detached reflection upon the causes and consequences of the material betterment of society.

### III

Since the 1960s, our understanding of every aspect of the Scottish Enlightenment's thinking has been enhanced and complicated by an impressive body of new scholarship. Much of this has blurred the original focus on the Scots' reflection on the progress of society, extending what counts as Enlightenment thought both chronologically and laterally, across a much wider range of fields. But at the core of the Scottish Enlightenment's intellectual project, I still wish to argue, were three related areas of enquiry: moral philosophy, history, and political economy. Through a brief review of each, I shall seek to show what that project was, before finally suggesting ways of assessing its contribution to the wider European Enlightenment.

It is in the field of moral philosophy that the connections between the thought of the Scottish Enlightenment and its predecessors have been studied most closely. From the early eighteenth century the Scots had been thoroughly exposed to two distinct ways of thinking about morals. One was academic, the account of the rights and duties of the citizen developed within the framework of natural jurisprudence by Samuel Pufendorf, and adapted to the needs of Scottish university teaching by Gershom Carmichael, first Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow. The other was polite, the attempt to render the classical values of virtuous citizenship in terms appropriate to a society of commerce and credit. Here the passage of ideas had been more complicated, Shaftesbury's attempt to mitigate the austerities of classical republicanism (to which the Scots had already been exposed by Andrew Fletcher) having run into the coruscating Epicurean scepticism of Mandeville. But the Mandevillian challenge had been countered by Francis Hutcheson, who had restated the case for man's natural sociability and capacity for virtue in terms more indebted to Stoicism. In the course of doing so, moreover, Hutcheson had transferred from Dublin to Glasgow, where he set about the further restatement of this argument in the prescribed Scottish academic discourse of natural jurisprudence. [18]

The particular importance of Hutcheson for the Scottish Enlightenment, however, has always lain in his relation to Hume. The prevailing view, from Norman Kemp Smith to David Norton, has been that 'Hume, under the influence of Hutcheson, entered into his philosophy through the gateway of morals'. Hume's philosophy of morals is read as an extension and elaboration of Hutcheson's. [19] But this account of the relation between Hutcheson and Hume is now in question. In what is probably the most original contribution to recent scholarship on the Scottish Enlightenment, James Moore has argued that the relation was not one of influence, but of fundamental opposition. His evidence is both circumstantial and philosophical. It seems that Hutcheson was almost certainly the author of the successive critical reviews of Books I and III of the *Treatise of Human Nature* which appeared anonymously in the Amsterdam journal, the *Bibliothèque Raisonnée* in 1740 and 1741, reviews which made a point of exposing the differences between Hume's work and Hutcheson's. [20] For his part, Hume must quickly have realised the depth of their differences. His initial, apparently deferential attempts to reconcile Hutcheson to his position were at best optimistic, and quite possibly mischievous. For philosophically, Moore argues, Hume was always a sceptic, in morals as well as epistemology. His sources were those of Mandeville (whom Hutcheson detested): Bayle and the French Augustinian moralists, Hobbes, but above all the ancient Epicureans. On this basis, an experimental theory of morals was bound to portray man as self-interested and unsociable, forming societies by the artificial, not natural, convention of justice. [21] Hume can hardly have been surprised when Hutcheson later opposed his candidacy for the Edinburgh chair of moral philosophy; [22] and his response, the deliberately 'polite' but rigorously argued *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), may be seen as underlining his break with both Hutcheson and the academic idiom of natural jurisprudence.

This radical reassessment of Hume's relation to Hutcheson suggests the need to be alert to other potential fault-lines within Scottish moral philosophy. Adam Smith is also often taken to have been the disciple of the teacher he called 'the never to be forgotten Dr Hutcheson', while following Hume in the attempt to combine a concept of sympathy as the foundation of moral judgement with an acknowledgement of self-interest as the primary passion. But it is unlikely that Smith's relation to either was so simple. It is at least suggestive that soon after he began lecturing at Glasgow, Smith was reported by suspicious local observers to have been openly critical of his predecessor. [23] On the other hand, the treatment of the idea of sympathy in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) suggests a renewed willingness to think in terms of natural sociability, notwithstanding the prevalence of self-interest in the most basic material relations between men. Hume immediately questioned Smith's extension of the concept of sympathy; [24] and the difference between them may be thought to have been underlined by Smith's increasing deployment of Stoic themes in later editions of the work. Still more in need of reassessment is the moral philosophy of Adam Ferguson. Never a pupil of Hutcheson, Ferguson infuriated Hume by dispensing with any attempt to derive moral judgement from sympathy in favour of a simple reassertion of the classical ideal of virtue. To Ferguson the sociability of men was explained neither by natural benevolence nor by the artificial utility of justice: instead it derived from their proclivity for war.

Throwing these fault-lines within Scottish moral philosophy into relief dispels any notion of a unified 'school'; but it also serves to clarify what the Enlightenment philosophers still had in common. Their starting-point was agreement that moral philosophy must respond to the emergence of a form of society apparently driven by the acquisitive pursuit of material goods. The principal analytical question, they further agreed, was whether sociability, virtue and justice were natural to mankind, or were rather the artificial constructions of self-interested individuals. And the answers, they all accepted, must be

made publicly available, not in the academic jargon of natural jurisprudence, but in a form and idiom which should sell to a philosophically interested laity. Of itself, this conception of moral philosophy was by no means unique to the Scots; but the quality of their thinking, and their willingness to integrate moral philosophy with the study of history and of political economy, made it central to their contribution to the Enlightenment.

History, the second subject at the heart of the Scottish Enlightenment's interests, was itself investigated in two forms, which for the most part were kept separate. One of these was 'natural' or, as it was later christened, 'conjectural' history. The most famous single example of the genre was Hume's *Natural History of Religion*, finally published in 1757; but it was more widely pursued, by Smith, Ferguson, Robertson and Millar, in the form of stadial theories of the development of society as a whole. As in moral philosophy, a conceptual framework for the discussion of historical development in terms of 'society' was already available in natural jurisprudence; and Smith and Millar made extensive use of it in their teaching. Here too, however, the natural jurisprudential framework was discarded in print. None was more ruthless in this respect than Ferguson, the first book of whose *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) displayed an impatience with the rigid categories of natural law and contract theory unmatched even by Montesquieu. Recent, closer examination of the varieties of Scottish stadial theory has shown that they were by no means simply materialist in their treatment of causation; indeed it is quite possible that the emphasis on unintended consequences was - in some minds - compatible with a continued, conceptually structural, role for Providence in human history. But it remains the case that stadial theories were exclusively concerned with the development - the progress - of society in this world, and paid no heed to the next.

The second form of historical enquiry pursued by the Scots was the traditional narrative. Here Hume was once again the pioneer, in his attempt to write a modern, sceptically impartial *History of England*. The political message of the *History* has exercised scholars since the 1960s; [25] and recently a new dimension has been added to the discussion by Colin Kidd's explanation of why a work initially entitled the *History of Great Britain* had to be reduced to a *History of England*. The answer lies in Hume's radically dismissive view of Scottish history. Denying the existence of any "ancient" constitution in the Scottish past which might serve as a basis for liberty in the present, Hume was obliged to conclude that the story of the English ancient constitution was the only one whose telling would serve a useful political purpose in Hanoverian Britain. British history was perforce Anglo-British, and Hume had to concentrate on clearing away the partisan myths that hindered an impartial understanding of the English constitution. [26] What remains to be explored is the extent to which Hume also attempted to integrate social, cultural and literary developments into his narrative. But it looks as if his ambitions in this respect were limited: his conception of narrative seems closer conceptually (though not stylistically) to the 'civil' history of Giannone than to the history of manners undertaken by Voltaire, let alone to a 'social' history of the sort suggested by the stadial theorists.

If this judgement is borne out, however, it will only enhance the achievement of William Robertson. Robertson may have begun by writing a civil history of Scotland. But he then proceeded to write an international history of Europe in the time of Charles V, of which the first volume was given over to a 'View of the Progress of Society in Europe' from the fall of the Roman Empire, and contained an extended discussion of the feudal system. Even more ambitious was the *History of America*, which included the first sustained attempt to use stadial theory in writing the history of specific peoples. [27] All of these were soon to be dwarfed by the achievement of Gibbon; but the difference between Hume's *England* and Robertson's *America* is one measure of how far the Scots had already come in the writing of history.

The third and, I want to suggest, most important of all the intellectual preoccupations of the Scottish Enlightenment was political economy. In this case an historical understanding of the Scots' achievement has depended on rejecting the traditional, doctrinal approach to the history of economic thought. The task was successfully accomplished by two books in particular, Donald Winch's revisionary study of *Adam Smith's Politics* (1978), followed in 1983 by Hont and Ignatieff's *Wealth and Virtue. The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*. [28] Here and elsewhere it was argued that the Scots approached political economy through two older traditions of political thought, the classical or civic humanist critique of commerce and more particularly of public credit, and the natural law theories of property rights and exchange. There is a real danger, nevertheless, that the political economy of the Scottish Enlightenment has been liberated from one interpretative straightjacket only to be constrained within others. In print, Hume, Smith and Sir James Steuart all presented economic principles as distinct and free-standing, as if confident that they could be understood in their own terms, without the need for extended reference to the natural law framework still used in teaching. So doing, they presumably expected to achieve greater conceptual clarity and the advancement of economic analysis for its own sake. At the same time, they clearly hoped to educate a wider reading public in the understanding of economic processes, and, at a distance, to influence the formation of government economic policy.

Hume again made the decisive initial contribution, in the economic essays in the *Political Discourses* (1752). I believe it can be shown that these essays were written as a systematic response to contemporary French political economy, and particularly to Jean-Francois Melon's *Essai Politique sur le Commerce* (1734, reissued with additional chapters in 1736, and republished on several occasions in the 1740s and 1750s). Against Melon's model of an economy in which agriculture was primary, requiring all other branches of economic activity to be subordinated to its demands, Hume offered one in which commerce itself was the agent of development, and its chief obstacles were jealousy of trade and the misuse of its instruments, money and credit. Responding in turn to Hume, Steuart's *Principles of Political Oeconomy* (1767) offered a careful, lengthy defence of continental orthodoxy. To which the reply, devastating in its silence, was the *Wealth of Nations* (1776), where Adam Smith set out a new synthesis, which restored agriculture to first place in the 'natural progress of opulence', but fiercely criticised the Physiocrat dirigisme which would maintain agriculture's primacy at the expense of the natural development of manufactures and commerce.

Here too, however, the differences between the Scots enhance rather than detract from their collective achievement. Ultimately Hume and Smith were agreed that an understanding of the technical processes of economic development was essential to both the understanding and the justification of modern society. For it was clear that the operation of these processes held out the prospect of real material benefits for most if not all of society's members. Growth in the wealth of nations should better the condition of every rank in society, including the lowest. If modern, commercial society must be less than classically virtuous, it was still, on material grounds, a much better society than any hitherto known. For the first time, political economy had made it possible to recognise that life in this world offered real consolations, irrespective of whatever other consolations might be held out as following in a world to come. Given this, political economy must also become the reference point from which moral philosophy and historical study of society's development had to take their bearings. Whether sociability was natural or artificial, how moral judgements were reached in a complex, individualist society, how the stages of society's development should be characterised: these issues could not now be discussed without acknowledging that material improvement was the driving force of modern society. In short, political economy was the conceptual foundation of the Scottish Enlightenment's commitment to the progress of society, and the sharp edge of its challenge to those men of religion for whom the supposed pains of this world were but a preparation for the imagined pleasures of the next.

#### IV

Even if thirty years of scholarship have complicated matters enormously, therefore, it is still possible to argue that the Scottish contribution to the Enlightenment lay first and foremost in the analysis and advocacy of the progress of society. There is no need to abandon the Scottish Enlightenment to post-modernists and cultural historians. But to set that contribution properly in perspective, we still need to remedy the isolation of the Scottish Enlightenment which has resulted from the popularity of the national context approach among its historians, by undertaking more studies which connect and compare the Scots with their continental counterparts.

It is of course well known that leading figures of the Scottish Enlightenment kept themselves informed of current developments on the continent, and especially in France, by travel, correspondence, reviews and book-buying. They could also respond directly to French work: Hume's engagement with Melon is one example, Smith's with Rousseau is another. But systematic textual study of the Scots' response to French thought is still in its infancy; and we know little about the access of the wider reading public to foreign books, whether by imports, reprints or translations.

Equally important to assessment of the Scottish contribution to the Enlightenment is a knowledge of the extent to which the writings of the Scots were known and read elsewhere. There was of course no guarantee that others would understand the ideas and arguments of the Scots as they themselves did. The dangers of misreception are finely displayed in Fania Oz-Salzberger's study of German translations and readings of the works of Adam Ferguson: English terms which to the Scot denoted public, political activism were translated into German concepts associated with inner moral self-development. [29] In this case, national differences appear seriously to have interfered with the connection; but there are others in which the lines of transmission were less obstructed. To render 'refinement' as 'civilisation', as Jean-Baptiste Suard did in his translation of William Robertson's *Charles V*, was a shift of nuance, not a fundamental change of meaning; and in Italy, where all three of his Histories were translated, Robertson was justly appreciated for his account of the failings of the feudal system. [30] Scottish political economy was likewise read across the continent of Europe. Here French translations were the most common intermediaries: providing the Enlightenment with a common language, French helped to make political economy a particularly transmissible discipline, thus further enhancing its centrality to the Enlightenment's pursuit of human betterment in this world.

My final suggestion, however, is that studies of the connections between Scotland and other parts of the Enlightenment might usefully be complemented by studies which are deliberately comparative. These can serve the obvious and useful purpose of clarifying what was distinctive and what was common to the various branches of the Enlightenment. But they may also serve another, potentially still more revealing purpose: assessment of the 'success' or 'failure' of the Enlightenment in its various eighteenth-century settings.

There is no denying that in different places the Enlightenment had to contend with very different political and economic circumstances. In the case of Scotland, the Enlightenment may be thought to have enjoyed considerable 'success', the country's experience of economic transformation under a free government vindicating the Enlightenment's prescriptions for the progress of society. Over much of continental Europe, by contrast, a discrepancy between the Enlightenment's objectives and the actual political and economic experience of society is more obvious. Among several possible illustrations of this frustration of the Enlightenment, the one which is of most interest to me is that provided by the Kingdom of Naples. Beginning the century in a predicament very similar to that of Scotland, as a dependent and underdeveloped province of a greater monarchy, in 1734 Naples had unexpectedly acquired its independence, which in turn was widely expected to be the key to the institutional reform and economic transformation of the Kingdom. Yet despite the best efforts of successive generations of Neapolitan illuministi, from Genovesi to Pagano, economic development obstinately failed to materialise, and the Enlightenment ended in the tragedy of the Parthenopean Republic of 1799. It may be an oversimplification to contrast Scottish 'success' with Neapolitan 'failure'. Nevertheless, if the Enlightenment is to be judged, it should be as an historical project, rather than as the philosophical aunt-Sally of the Postmodernists: and in historical perspective, the key question facing the Enlightenment concerns the extent to which its understanding of the progress of society, and its prescriptions for achieving the betterment of the human condition in this world, were adapted to the variety of the circumstances, and the intransigence of the obstacles, which it had to confront in eighteenth-century Europe.

[E-seminars index](#) | [back to the top](#)

## Notes

1. Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge, 1975), p. xi.
2. Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century*, lxxviii, (1967). In turn, Trevor-Roper acknowledged a debt to the pioneering work of Gladys Bryson, *Man and Society. The Scottish Inquiry of the Eighteenth century* (Princeton, 1945).
3. Franco Venturi, 'Les lumieres dans l'Europe du 18e siecle', first published in *XIe Congres International des Sciences Historiques: Rapports*, IV, Histoire Moderne (Stockholm, 1960); translated into English as 'The European Enlightenment', in S.J. Woolf (ed), Franco Venturi, *Italy and the Enlightenment. Studies in a Cosmopolitan Century* (London, 1972). *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 132-3.
4. Lisa Jardine, *Erasmus, Man of Letters* (Princeton, 1993); Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning. Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters 1680-1750* (New Haven and London, 1995).
5. R. Porter & M. Teich (eds), *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge, 1981).
6. Nicholas Phillipson, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', in Porter & Teich (eds), *The Enlightenment in National Context*.
7. J.G.A. Pocock, 'Clergy and commerce. The conservative enlightenment in England', in Raffaele Ajello et al, (eds), *L'eta dei lumi. Studi storici sul settecento europeo in onore di Franco Venturi*, two vols, (Naples, 1985), Vol. 1, pp. 523- 62.
8. Margaret Jacob, 'The mental landscape of the public sphere: a European perspective', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 28, 1 (1994), pp. 95-113.
9. Roger Emerson, 'Scottish universities in the eighteenth century 1690-1800', *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century*, clxvii, (1977), 453-74; and, by the same author, *Professors, Patronage and Politics. The Aberdeen Universities in the Eighteenth Century* (Aberdeen, 1992). The appendices of this book contain invaluable statistical information about the professoriate in all five Scottish universities.
10. Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment. The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton & Edinburgh, 1985).
11. N.T. Phillipson, 'The social structure of the faculty of Advocates in Scotland 1661-1840', in A. Harding (Ed), *Law-Making and Law-Makers in British History* (London, 1980).
12. Roger L. Emerson, 'The social composition of Enlightened Scotland: the Select Society of Edinburgh 1754-64', *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century*, cxiv (1973); Richard B.Sher, 'Commerce, religion and the Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Glasgow', in T.M. Devine & Gordon Jackson (eds), *Glasgow. Volume I: Beginnings to 1830* (Manchester & New York, 1995) pp.335-7.
13. David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry. Scotland's Century 1590-1710* (Cambridge, 1988).
14. Roger L. Emerson, 'The "affair" at Edinburgh and the "project" at Glasgow: the politics of Hume's attempts to become a professor', in M.A. Stewart & John P. Wright (eds), *Hume and Hume's Connexions* (Edinburgh, 1994); MA Stewart, *The Kirk and the Infidel*, an inaugural lecture at the University of Lancaster, (Lancaster, 1995).
15. An exception is Paul Wood, 'Science, the universities and the public sphere in eighteenth-century Scotland', *History of Universities*, XIII (1994), pp. 99-135.

But Wood simply uses Habermas' thesis as an opportunity to re-state the case for the importance of natural science.

16. John Robertson, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue* (Edinburgh, 1985).
17. T.C. Smout, 'Where had the Scottish economy got to by the third quarter of the eighteenth century?', in Hont & Ignatieff (eds), *Wealth and Virtue*; and T.M. Devine, *The Transformation of Rural Scotland. Social Change and the Agrarian Economy 1660-1815* (Edinburgh, 1994).
18. James Moore, 'The two systems of Francis Hutcheson: on the origins of the Scottish Enlightenment', in MA Stewart (Ed), *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1990).
19. Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume. A Critical Study of its Origins and Central Doctrines* (1941, repr. London & New York, 1966), p. 12; David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common Sense Moralists, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton, 1982).
20. Only brief sketches of this episode have so far been published: James Moore and MA Stewart, 'A Scots-Irish Bookseller in Holland: William Smith of Amsterdam (1698- 1741)', *Eighteenth-Century Scotland*, The Newsletter of the Eighteenth-Century Scottish Studies Society, no. 7, (1993), pp. 8-11; and the same authors' 'William Smith and the Dissenters' book trade', *Bulletin of the Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland* (1993), pp. 24-6.
21. James Moore, 'Hume and Hutcheson', in Stewart & Wright (eds), *Hume and Hume's Connexions*. Independently of Moore, a similar case for believing Hume to have differed fundamentally from Hutcheson has been outlined by Luigi Turco, in 'Hutcheson nel terzo libro del *Trattato sulla Natura Humana*', in Marco Geuna & Maria Luisa Pesante, *Passioni, interessi, convenzioni. Discussioni settecentesche su virtù e civiltà* (Milano, 1992).
22. See Stewart, *The Kirk and the Infidel*.
23. I.S. Ross, 'Adam Smith's "happiest" years as a Glasgow professor', in Andrew Hook & Richard B. Sher (eds), *The Glasgow Enlightenment* (East Linton, 1995), pp. 78-9.
24. Hume to Adam Smith, 28 July 1759, in *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, no. 36, p. 43: "I wish you had more particularly and fully prov'd, that all Kinds of Sympathy are necessarily Agreeable. This is the Hinge of your System..."
25. Giuseppe Giarrizzo, *David Hume politico e storico* (Torino, 1962); Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics*, Part III: Philosophical History. More recently, Nicholas Phillipson, *Hume* (London, 1989); and David Wootton, 'David Hume, "the historian"', in David Fate Norton (Ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Hume* (Cambridge, 1993).
26. Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past. Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity 1689- c. 1830* (Cambridge, 1993), esp. Part II.
27. William Robertson, *History of Scotland* (1759); *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V, with a View of the Progress of Society in Europe* (1769); *The History of America* (1777). A new collection of essays should provide the spring-board for further work on Robertson: Stewart J. Brown (ed.), *William Robertson and the expansion of empire* (Cambridge, 1997)
28. Donald Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics* (Cambridge, 1978); Istvan Hont & Michael Ignatieff (eds), *Wealth and Virtue. The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1983). Both of these owed much in turn to the gradual appearance in these years of *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, edited D.D. Raphael, A.S. Skinner and others (Oxford, 1976-87).
29. Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Translating the Enlightenment. Scottish civic discourse in eighteenth-century Germany* (Oxford, 1995).
30. Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty. Equality and Sociability in French Thought 1670-1789* (Princeton, 1994), Ch. 4: 'Sociability and universal history: Jean-Baptist Suard and the Scottish Enlightenment in France', esp. pp. 150-60. Gianfranco Tarabuzzi, 'Le traduzioni italiane settecentesche delle opere DI William Robertson', *Rivista Storica Italiana*, xci, (1979). See also Franco Venturi, 'Scottish echoes in eighteenth-century Italy', in Hont & Ignatieff, *Wealth and Virtue*.

[E-seminars index](#) | [back to the top](#)

The Institute of Historical Research (IHR), Senate House, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU  
The IHR is a member of the School of Advanced Study which is part of the University of London

The Scottish Enlightenment The period of dominance of humanistic value in Scottish intellectual realm of 18th century is commonly referred to as Scottish. Yet, their cultural attachment to the French humanistic tradition, caused them to base their vision of socio-economic relations on the notions of morality and public good. This, of course, is a very naive suggestion, because economical development and pursuing the ideal of social justice cannot really coexist, as the history of 19th and 20th centuries had taught us. But what was especially valuable about Scottish Enlightenment is that it had a very distinctive anti-Christian undertones. Scottish Enlightenment, the conjunction of minds, ideas, and publications in Scotland during the whole of the second half of the 18th century and extending over several decades on either side of that period. Contemporaries referred to Edinburgh as a "hotbed of genius." Voltaire in 1762 wrote in "There are those who specify that the Scottish Enlightenment began in 1740, although this fails to take account of the date of publication of one of the two most significant books to come out of the period: Hume's A Treatise of Human Nature , the product of agonized labours in France in the 1730s. Its first two volumes were published in 1739, preceding the other truly great work of the Enlightenment, Smith's The Wealth of Nations , by 37 years.