

JOHN MILLAR

The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks

Millar describes his treatise as an illustration of the 'natural history of mankind', by which he has in mind particularly the way in which 'the gradual progress of civilization and improvement' affects 'the manners, laws, and the government of a people'. Among the topics he explores, as a pioneer, under the heading of 'natural history' are the rank and condition of women in pastoral and agricultural ages and at times of great opulence, and the form of authority that a master has over his servant in primitive and subsequent ages. If this task is to be accomplished, the author must take a view regarding the stages through which society naturally passes, and also a view regarding the way in which variations in the circumstances of a society affect in detail the shape that the society takes at each stage in its development.

Nevertheless there are constraints on the range of variations, the chief constraint being the uniformity of human nature. It is less the differences among people than the differences of the circumstances within which they operate that produce the different systems of law and different social structures that we see today, though of course, as Millar stresses, our ideas and feelings are strongly affected by those same circumstances, and constitute, though at a lower level of abstraction, a degree of diversity among people.

The idea that human nature is essentially uniform is a common position of the Enlightenment, informing, for example, much of Hume's economic, political and historical work. The view is much enhanced by Newton's demonstration that the great variety of changes in the universe can be brought under a few principles, in the end under a single one, the inverse square law. The process of understanding nature is therefore a process of grand simplification. The point about a principle of change is that it is applicable to many individual changes; the principle that explains why a change of a particular

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kind occurs can also explain why many others of that kind also occur.

Millar, in search of this principle, seeks it in the uniformity of human nature. His starting point is this, that there is in man 'a disposition and capacity for improving his condition, by the exertion of which, he is carried on from one degree of advancement to another', and since we are similar in respect of our wants and of the faculties by means of which those wants are satisfied, the successive steps of our progress are also 'remarkably uniform'. The steps he outlines, which are reminiscent of steps outlined by Adam Smith (see excerpt 24), take us from the primitive hunter-gatherer stage to commercial life. Millar stresses a corresponding development in moral insight and activity. For example, he notes that as society develops and we become less oppressed by our wants, we are more at liberty to cultivate the feelings of humanity. Likewise, the rights of mankind become recognised and protected, and more complex forms of government, and more complex systems of law, are put in place in response to the need for the distribution of justice, especially in respect of the greater quantity of property, and more complicated forms of ownership of it.

These various changes Millar describes as 'a natural progress'; what he offers here is a natural history of humankind. There is a kind of determinism implicit in the picture he draws, but it is tempered by his view that accidents can and do happen, in particular that people of genius arise who make a difference which cannot be anticipated because it depends on the precise character of the genius, and the precise circumstances, especially the social circumstances in which they operate. Nevertheless, Millar is doubtful about the extent to which even a genius can effect changes in society, unless he works along, and not against, the grain of society. It is plain that Millar believes that climate has a much greater impact on the development of a society than is ever made by the great persons in its midst.

The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks

Those who have examined the manners and customs of nations have had chiefly two objects in view. By observing the systems of law established in different parts of the world, and by remarking the consequences with which they are attended, men have endeavoured to reap advantage from the experience of others, and to make a selection of such institutions and modes of government as appear most worthy of being adopted.

To investigate the causes of different usages has been likewise esteemed an useful as well as an entertaining speculation. When we contemplate the amazing diversity to be found in the laws of different countries, and even of the same country at different periods, our curiosity is naturally excited to enquire in what manner mankind have been led to embrace such different rules of conduct; and at the same time it is evident, that, unless we are acquainted with the circumstances which have recommended any set of regulations, we cannot form a just notion of their utility, or even determine, in any case, how far they are practicable.

In searching for the causes of those peculiar systems of law and government which have appeared in the world, we must undoubtedly resort, first of all, to the differences of situation, which have suggested different views and motives of action to the inhabitants of particular countries. Of this kind, are the fertility or barrenness of the soil, the nature of its productions, the species of labour requisite for procuring subsistence, the number of individuals collected together in one community, their proficiency in arts, the advantages which they enjoy for entering into mutual transactions, and for maintaining an intimate correspondence. The variety that frequently occurs in these, and such other particulars, must have a prodigious influence upon the great body of a people; as, by giving a peculiar direction to their inclinations and pursuits, it must be productive of correspondent habits, dispositions, and ways of thinking.

When we survey the present state of the globe, we find that, in many parts of it, the inhabitants are so destitute of culture, as to appear little above the condition of brute animals; and even when we peruse the remote history of polished nations, we have seldom any difficulty in tracing them to a state of the same rudeness and barbarism. There is, however, in man a disposition and capacity

for improving his condition, by the exertion of which, he is carried on from one degree of advancement to another; and the similarity of his wants, as well as of the faculties by which those wants are supplied, has every where produced a remarkable uniformity in the several steps of his progression. A nation of savages, who feel the want of almost every thing requisite for the support of life, must have their attention directed to a small number of objects, to the acquisition of food and clothing, or the procuring shelter from the inclemencies of the weather; and their ideas and feelings, in conformity to their situation, must, of course, be narrow and contracted. Their first efforts are naturally calculated to increase the means of subsistence, by catching or ensnaring wild animals, or by gathering the spontaneous fruits of the earth; and the experience, acquired in the exercise of these employments, is apt, successively, to point out the methods of taming and rearing cattle, and of cultivating the ground. According as men have been successful in these great improvements, and find less difficulty in the attainment of bare necessities, their prospects are gradually enlarged, their appetites and desires are more and more awakened and called forth in pursuit of the several conveniences of life; and the various branches of manufacture, together with commerce, its inseparable attendant, and with science and literature, the natural offspring of ease and affluence, are introduced, and brought to maturity. By such gradual advances in rendering their situation more comfortable, the most important alterations are produced in the state and condition of a people: their numbers are increased; the connections of society are extended; and men, being less oppressed with their own wants, are more at liberty to cultivate the feelings of humanity: property, the great source of distinction among individuals, is established; and the various rights of mankind, arising from their multiplied connections, are recognised and protected: the laws of a country are thereby rendered numerous; and a more complex form of government becomes necessary, for distributing justice, and for preventing the disorders which proceed from the jarring interests and passions of a large and opulent community. It is evident, at the same time, that these, and such other effects of improvement, which have so great a tendency to vary the state of mankind, and their manner of life, will be productive of suitable variations in their taste and sentiments, and in their general system of behaviour.

There is thus, in human society, a natural progress from ignorance to knowledge, and from rude, to civilized manners, the several stages of which are usually accompanied with peculiar laws

and customs. Various accidental causes, indeed, have contributed to accelerate, or to retard this advancement in different countries. It has even happened that nations, being placed in such unfavourable circumstances as to render them long stationary at a particular period, have been so habituated to the peculiar manners of that age, as to retain a strong tincture of those peculiarities, through every subsequent revolution. This appears to have occasioned some of the chief varieties which take place in the maxims and customs of nations equally civilized.

The character and genius of a nation may, perhaps, be considered as nearly the same with that of every other in similar circumstances; but the case is very different with respect to individuals, among whom there is often a great diversity, proceeding from no fixed causes that are capable of being ascertained. Thus, in a multitude of dice thrown together at random, the result, at different times, will be nearly equal; but in one or two throws of a single die, very different numbers may often be produced. It is to be expected, therefore, that, though the greater part of the political system of any country be derived from the combined influence of the whole people, a variety of peculiar institutions will sometimes take their origin from the casual interposition of particular persons, who happen to be placed at the head of a community, and to be possessed of singular abilities, and views of policy. This has been regarded, by many writers, as the great source of those differences which are to be found in the laws, and government of different nations. It is thus that Brama is supposed to have introduced the peculiar customs of Indostan; that Lycurgus is believed to have formed the singular character of the Lacedaemonians; and that Solon is looked upon as the author of that very different style of manners which prevailed at Athens. It is thus, also, that the English constitution is understood to have arisen from the uncommon genius, and patriotic spirit of King Alfred. In short, there is scarcely any people, ancient or modern, who do not boast of some early monarch, or statesman, to whom it is pretended they owe whatever is remarkable in their form of government.

But, notwithstanding the concurring testimony of historians, concerning the great political changes introduced by the lawgivers of a remote age, there may be reason to doubt, whether the effect of their interpositions has ever been so extensive as is generally supposed. Before an individual can be invested with so much authority, and possessed of such reflection and foresight as would induce him to act in the capacity of a legislator, he

must, probably, have been educated and brought up in the knowledge of those natural manners and customs, which, for ages perhaps, have prevailed among his countrymen. Under the influence of all the prejudices derived from ancient usage, he will commonly be disposed to prefer the system already established to any other, of which the effects have not been ascertained by experience; or if in any case he should venture to entertain a different opinion, he must be sensible that, from the general prepossession in favour of the ancient establishment, an attempt to overturn it, or to vary it in any considerable degree, would be a dangerous measure, extremely unpopular in itself, and likely to be attended with troublesome consequences.

As the greater part of those heroes and sages that are reputed to have been the founders and modellers of states, are only recorded by uncertain tradition, or by fabulous history, we may be allowed to suspect that, from the obscurity in which they are placed, or from the admiration of distant posterity, their labours have been exaggerated, and misrepresented. It is even extremely probable, that those patriotic statesmen, whose existence is well ascertained, and whose laws have been justly celebrated, were at great pains to accommodate their regulations to the situation of the people for whom they were intended; and that, instead of being actuated by a projecting spirit, or attempting from visionary speculations of remote utility, to produce any violent reformation, they confined themselves to such moderate improvements as, by deviating little from the former usage, were in some measure supported by experience, and coincided with the prevailing opinions of the country. All the ancient systems of legislation that have been handed down to us with any degree of authenticity, show evident marks of their having been framed with such reasonable views; and in none of them is this more remarkable than in the regulations of the Spartan Lawgiver, which appear, in every respect, agreeable to the primitive manners of that simple and barbarous people, for whose benefit they were promulgated.

Among the several circumstances which may affect the gradual improvements of society, the difference of climate is one of the most remarkable. In warm countries, the earth is often extremely fertile, and with little culture is capable of producing whatever is necessary for subsistence. To labour under the extreme heat of the sun is, at the same time, exceedingly troublesome and oppressive. The inhabitants, therefore, of such countries, while they enjoy a degree of affluence, and, while by the mildness of the climate they are exempted from many inconveniences and wants, are seldom

disposed to any laborious exertion, and thus, acquiring habits of indolence, become addicted to sensual pleasure, and liable to all those infirmities which are nourished by idleness and sloth. The people who live in a cold country find, on the contrary, that little or nothing is to be obtained without labour; and being subjected to numberless hardships, while they are forced to contend with the ruggedness of the soil, and the severity of the seasons, in earning their scanty provision, they become active and industrious, and acquire those dispositions and talents which proceed from the constant and vigorous exercise both of the mind and body.

Some philosophers are of opinion, that the difference of heat and cold, of moisture and dryness, or other qualities of the climate, have a more immediate influence upon the character and conduct of nations, by operating insensibly upon the human body, and by effecting correspondent alterations in the temper. It is pretended that great heat, by relaxing the fibres, and by extending the surface of the skin, where the action of the nerves is chiefly performed, occasions great sensibility to all external impressions; which is accompanied with proportionable vivacity of ideas and feelings. The inhabitants of a hot country are, upon this account, supposed to be naturally deficient in courage, and in that steadiness of attention which is necessary for the higher exertions of judgment; while they are no less distinguished by their extreme delicacy of taste, and liveliness of imagination. The weakness, too, of their bodily organs prevents them from consuming a great quantity of food, though their excessive perspiration, the effect of the climate, requires continual supplies of such thin liquors as are proper to repair the waste of their fluids. In this situation, therefore, temperance in eating and drinking becomes a constitutional virtue.

The inhabitants of a cold region, are said, on the other hand, to acquire an opposite complexion. As cold tends to brace the fibres, and to contract the operation of the nerves, it is held to produce a vigorous constitution of body, with little sensibility or vivacity; from which we may expect activity, courage, and resolution, together with such calm and steady views of objects, as are usually connected with a clear understanding. The vigorous constitutions of men, in a cold climate, are also supposed to demand great supplies of strong food, and to create a particular inclination for intoxicating liquors.

In some such manner as this, it is imagined that the character of different nations arises, in a great measure, from the air which they breathe, and from the soil upon which they are maintained. How

far these conjectures have any real foundation, it seems difficult to determine. We are too little acquainted with the structure of the human body, to discover how it is affected by such physical circumstances, or to discern the alterations in the state of the mind, which may possibly proceed from a different conformation of bodily organs; and in the history of the world, we see no regular marks of that secret influence which has been ascribed to the air and climate, but, on the contrary, may commonly explain the great differences in the manners and customs of mankind from other causes, the existence of which is capable of being more clearly ascertained.

How many nations are to be found, whose situation in point of climate is apparently similar, and, yet, whose character and political institutions are entirely opposite? Compare, in this respect, the mildness and moderation of the Chinese, with the rough manners and intolerant principles of their neighbours in Japan. What a contrast is exhibited by people at no greater distance than were the ancient Athenians and Lacedæmonians? Can it be conceived that the difference between the climate of France and that of Spain, or between that of Greece and of the neighbouring provinces of the Turkish empire, will account for the different usages and manners of the present inhabitants? How is it possible to explain those national peculiarities that have been remarked in the English, the Irish, and the Scotch, from the different temperature of the weather under which they have lived?

The different manners of people in the same country, at different periods, are no less remarkable, and afford evidence yet more satisfactory, that national character depends very little upon the immediate operation of climate. The inhabitants of Sparta are, at present, under the influence of the same physical circumstances as in the days of Leonidas. The modern Italians live in the country of the ancient Romans.

The following Inquiry is intended to illustrate the natural history of mankind in several important articles. This is attempted, by pointing out the more obvious and common improvements which gradually arise in the state of society, and by showing the influence of these upon the manners, the laws, and the government of a people.

With regard to the facts made use of in the following discourse, the reader, who is conversant in history, will readily perceive the difficulty of obtaining proper materials for speculations of this nature. Historians of reputation have commonly overlooked the

transactions of early ages, as not deserving to be remembered; and even in the history of later and more cultivated periods, they have been more solicitous to give an exact account of battles, and public negotiations, than of the interior police and government of a country. Our information, therefore, with regard to the state of mankind in the rude parts of the world, is chiefly derived from the relations of travellers, whose character and situation in life, neither set them above the suspicion of being easily deceived, nor of endeavouring to misrepresent the facts which they have related. From the number, however, and the variety of those relations, they acquire, in many cases, a degree of authority, upon which we may depend with security, and to which the narration of any single person, how respectable soever, can have no pretension. When illiterate men, ignorant of the writings of each other, and who, unless upon religious subjects, had no speculative systems to warp their opinions, have, in distant ages and countries, described the manners of people in similar circumstances, the reader has an opportunity of comparing their several descriptions, and from their agreement or disagreement is enabled to ascertain the credit that is due to them. According to this method of judging, which throws the veracity of the relater very much out of the question, we may be convinced of the truth of extraordinary facts, as well as of those that are more agreeable to our own experience. It may even be remarked, that in proportion to the singularity of any event, it is the more improbable that different persons, who design to impose upon the world, but who have no concert with each other, should agree in relating it. When to all this, we are able to add the reasons of those particular customs which have been uniformly reported, the evidence becomes as complete as the nature of the thing will admit. We cannot refuse our assent to such evidence, without falling into a degree of scepticism by which the credibility of all historical testimony would be in a great measure destroyed. This observation, it is hoped, will serve as an apology for the multiplicity of facts that are sometimes stated in confirmation of the following remarks. At the same time, from an apprehension of being tedious, the author has, on other occasions, selected only a few, from a greater number to the same purpose, that might easily have been procured.

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TWENTY-SIX

ADAM FERGUSON

The Origins of Civil Society

Although the concepts of improvement and of progress were much in the air during the Scottish Enlightenment, many of the leading thinkers were aware that in many areas progress has a price tag, as witness, for example, Adam Smith's discussion (see excerpt 22) of the threat to the spiritual well-being of the citizens that is posed by the extreme application of the principle of the division of labour. In a sense what is called progress often involves new cures for new ailments.

Adam Ferguson takes much the same measured view as Adam Smith of the way a forward step of social progress is so often accompanied by a backward step. Indeed Ferguson is sceptical as to whether there is progress at all if progress is to be measured in terms of an increasing disproportion of happiness over unhappiness in society. Each person accommodates himself to the conditions of his own society, and the fact that we can hardly, if at all, imagine ourselves happy in most positions in any earlier society does not amount to serious proof that people reared in those societies were not as happy, more or less, as we are in ours. As against our totally unscientific conjectures about how we would feel if we lived in a society so unlike our own that we have practically no relevant experience to support our conjectures, Ferguson proposes a scientific methodology. Whereof there are no records, there is no point in offering descriptions. Ferguson refers to 'boundless regions of ignorance', and among the unscientific descriptions that he has in his sights are those by Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He also has in his sights Hume, whose *Treatise of Human Nature* is declared in its subtitle to be 'an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into the moral subjects', but whose account of the formation of society is a conjectural piece concerning the natural appetite between the sexes. In other