

Adam Ferguson On Civil Society 1767

(Adam Ferguson, "Of Population and Wealth," *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), Part 111, Section IV; in J. F. C. Harrison, ed., *Society and Politics in England, 1780-1960*, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, pp. 10-12. Ferguson, 1723-1816, was one of an influential group of Scottish moral philosophers.)

However important the object of population may be held by mankind, it will be difficult to find, in the history of civil policy, any wise or effectual establishments, solely calculated to obtain it. The practice of rude or feeble nations is inadequate, or cannot surmount the obstacles which are found in their manner of life. The growth of industry, the endeavours of men to improve their arts, to extend their commerce, to secure their possessions, and to establish their rights, are indeed the most effectual means to promote population: but they arise from a different motive; they arise from regards to interest and personal safety. They are intended for the benefit of those who exist, not to procure the increase of their numbers.

It is, in the meantime, of importance to know, that where a people are fortunate in their political establishments, and successful in the pursuits of industry, their population is likely to grow in proportion. Most of the other devices thought of for this purpose, only serve to frustrate the expectations of mankind, or to mislead their attention.

In planting a colony, in striving to repair the occasional wastes of pestilence or war, the immediate contrivance of statesmen may be useful; but if, in reasoning on the increase of mankind in general, we overlook their freedom and their happiness, our aids to population become weak and ineffectual. They only lead us to work on the surface, or to pursue a shadow, while we neglect the substantial concern; and in a decaying state, make us tamper with palliatives, while the roots of an evil are suffered to remain. . . .

It is indeed happy for mankind, that this important object is not always dependent on the wisdom of sovereigns, or the policy of single men. A people intent on freedom, find for themselves a condition in which they may follow the propensities of nature with a more signal effect, than any which the councils of state could devise. When sovereigns, or projectors, are the supposed masters of this subject, the best they can do, is to be cautious of hurting an interest they cannot greatly promote, and of making breaches they cannot repair. . . .

Men will crowd where the situation is tempting, and, in a few generations, will people every country to the measure of its means of subsistence. They will even increase under circumstances that portend a decay. . . .

But even the increase of mankind which attends the accumulation of wealth, has its limits. The *necessary of life* is a vague and a relative term: it is one thing in the opinion of the savage; another in that of the polished citizen: it has a reference to the fancy, and to the habits of living. While arts improve, and riches increase; while the possessions of individuals, or their prospects of gain, come up to their opinion of what is required to settle a family, they enter on its cares with alacrity. But when the possession, however redundant, falls short of the standard, and a

fortune supposed sufficient for marriage is attained with difficulty, population is checked, or begins to decline. The citizen, in his own apprehension, returns to the state of the savage; his children, he thinks, must perish for want; and he quits a scene overflowing with plenty, because he has not the fortune which his supposed rank, or his wishes, require. No ultimate remedy is applied to this evil, by merely accumulating wealth; for rare and costly materials, whatever these are, continue to be sought; and if silks and pearl are made common, men will begin to covet some new decorations, which the wealthy alone can procure. If they are indulged in their humour, their demands are repeated; for it is the continual increase of riches, not any measure attained, that keeps the craving imagination at ease.

Men are tempted to labour, and to practise lucrative arts, by motives of interest. Secure to the workman the fruit of his labour, give him the prospects of independence or freedom, the public has found a faithful minister in the acquisition of wealth, and a faithful steward in hoarding what he has gained. The statesman, in this, as in the case of population itself, can do little more than avoid doing mischief. It is well, if, in the beginnings of commerce, he knows how to repress the frauds to which it is subject. Commerce, if continued, is the branch in which men, committed to the effects of their own experience, are least apt to go wrong. . . .

If population be connected with national wealth, liberty and personal security is the great foundation of both: and if this foundation be laid in the state, nature has secured the increase and industry of its members; the one by desires the most ardent in the human frame, the other by a consideration the most uniform and constant of any that possesses the mind. The great object of policy, therefore, with respect to both, is, to secure to the family its means of subsistence and settlement; to protect the industrious in the pursuit of his occupation; to reconcile the restrictions of police, and the social affections of mankind, with their separate and interested pursuits.

In matters of particular profession, industry, and trade, the experienced practitioner is the master, and every general reasoner is a novice. The object in commerce is to make the individual rich; the more he gains for himself, the more he augments the wealth of his country. If a protection be required, it must be granted; if crimes and frauds be committed, they must be repressed; and government can pretend to no more. When the refined politician would lend an active hand, he only multiplies interruptions and grounds of complaint; when the merchant forgets his own interest to lay plans for his country, the period of vision and chimera is near, and the solid basis of commerce withdrawn. He might be told, that while he pursues his advantage, and gives no cause of complaint, the interest of commerce is safe.