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RÉSUMÉ – Ce travail étudie comment Turgot, Steuart et Smith décrivent l'évolution des divers stades chasse, de l'élevage, de l'agriculture et du commerce conduit à une “société commerçante”. L'article montre que les trois théories ont en commun le fait de mettre en avant le rôle des forces productives et de l'organisation économique bien que ces théories soient significativement différentes et que les conditions requises pour la transition vers une “société commerçante” ne soient pas les mêmes.

MOTS-CLÉS – Histoire de la pensée économique jusqu'en 1925, société commerçante, théorie cyclique, Lumières, développement économique

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ABSTRACT – This paper examines the use of the hunting, pasturage, agriculture and commerce sequence in the writings of Turgot, Steuart and Smith. We found explanations which were identical in the pre-eminence of the productive forces and economic organisation, despite that fact, these theories are significantly different. This paper presents three distinct dynamic principles in their four-stage theory, and the conditions for the movement from the agricultural stage to commercial society do not coincide.

KEYWORDS – History of Economic Thought through 1925, Commercial society, cyclical theory, Enlightenment, Economic development

TURGOT, SMITH AND STEUART ON STADIAL HISTORIES

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INTRODUCTION

The theory of the stages of society appeared in the mid-18th century. Following a successful reception over the course of the second half of the century, the four-stage theory was finally adopted by Classical Economics, holding that the exchange economy is the final outcome of a long period of economic development.

A second relevant literature on this question took a *materialist interpretation* of the treatment of history by these enlightened authors (Pascal, 1938; Meek, 1971, 1976). Thus, the social process and its resulting forms of government are a consequence of productive forces and economic organisation. This reading faded with the appearance of authors who proposed a reading which attached greater importance to a legal and political sphere that was independent of economic forces (Haakonssen, 1981, p. 181–189; Winch, 1983). Although the debate began with the case of Adam Smith, this *legislative focus* spread until the sequence of hunting, pasturage, agriculture and commerce was relegated to a “narrative framework” with no explanatory content (Pocock, 1999). For example, *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1773) by Adam Ferguson uses an approach based on three historical stages but the political

domain is more crucial than the sphere of economic reproduction (Geuna, 2002), the four-stage account in *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774) by Lord Kames stems from a specific context (American nations) with no argumentative use, as occurs in *De l'Esprit* (1758) by Claude-Adrien Helvétius. The question aroused by the debate in the literature is whether the four-stage theory really implies that systems of laws and government can be explained by economic causes.

As a consequence of this debate, some recent papers have been especially concerned with the specific content of stadial histories. Andrew Skinner and John Salter, although they were analysing the case of the birth of commercial society, highlighted the importance of the economic forces used by Adam Smith (Skinner, 1975; Salter, 1992).¹ Also, in the context of the Scottish enlightenment, Berry (2013) delimited the use of the four-stage theory—Smith, John Millar and Hugh Blair—and explained the influence of Conjectural History. Ravix (2014) also pointed out the difference between two models of transition from feudal to commercial societies—A.-R.-J. Turgot's approach is based on the accumulation of capital while the Hume-Smith model is grounded in the market. In this respect, we seek to extend the research beyond both the Scottish Historical School and the origin of commercial society. Specifically, we ask whether stadial histories are really a narrative framework or whether, on the other hand, in the treatment of history by the authors analysed, economic forces have a transcendental role in the social process. To this end, we analyse the use of the hunting, pasturage, agriculture and commerce sequence in the writings of Turgot, James Steuart and Smith. There are two reasons for this choice. Firstly, these three stadial histories are independent. There is no demonstrated influence of Turgot on Smith (or *vice-versa*) and Steuart was not influenced in any way by Smith, although he came from the same environment, and neither did he have any known contact with Turgot, although he lived in France during the 1750s. Secondly, Turgot and Steuart have been practically ignored in recent literature even if the former is the main reference point on this question on the other side of the Channel.² We include Smith

1 It is important to acknowledge James Alvey's (2003) contribution to this debate. He proposes that the both views — civic humanist and materialist — exist in Smith.

2 Turgot's writings are widely recognized as the antecedents of Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1793-1794). *De l'origine des loix, des arts et des sciences et de leurs progrès chez les anciens peuples* (1785) by Antoine-Yves Goguet and

in this analysis as he is the main author around whose work the debate on *stadial histories* has revolved, something which is of invaluable aid in the comparative analysis.

As a starting point, we analyse the references generally accepted in the literature to note the common ground and the contrasts: the model of the leap from a state of nature to civil society of natural jurisprudence and the comparative focus of Montesquieu (section I). To explain the effects of the increase in commerce and manufacturing on society, *stadial histories* propose the use of stages, as occurs in the literature on natural jurisprudence, but especially those in which the physical and political causes are reduced to a minimum. As a corollary, we add that the principle of progress involves a slide from simple to complex, rather than an improvement. In section II, we carry out a comparative analysis of the stadial histories of Turgot, Smith and Steuart. We found theories which were similar, but which were identical in the pre-eminence of the productive forces and economic organisation. Firstly, a number of dynamic principles are noted—*i.e.*, a natural tendency to improve their conditions, a series of shocks that change the historical stage and the innovative capacity of some individuals. Secondly, the necessary conditions for the movement from the agricultural stage to commercial society do not coincide. Turgot requires an accumulation of capital, Smith uses the market and Steuart points to the artificial institutions created by merchants. This is the central point in order to understand the differences between their economic theories.

I. FOUNDATIONS OF THE STAGES THEORY

Given that there is no demonstrated influence of Turgot on Smith, Meek (1971) sets out a series of pieces—*i.e.*, the natural law tradition, the books by Pierre-François Xavier Charlevoix and Joseph-François Lafitau, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet's *Histoire Universelle* and Montesquieu—that

Alexandre-Conrad Fugère may also be considered the result of Turgot's ideas because the schema is repeated literally. For a comparison between Turgot and Condorcet on this matter, see Boarini (2011).

enable the authors to propose a four-stage theory. Recent literature has also added several sources upon which some of these theories are based, such as Samuel Pufendorf, John Locke's theory of mind, Blaise Pascal and Lord Bacon (Hont, 1987). However, the foundations are theoretical since there is no evidence that any *stage history* is constructed from them—not even the authors know these foundations (Berry, 2013, p. 46). We therefore limit ourselves to the analysis of the references generally accepted in the literature—*i.e.*, the Natural Law model of the step-change from the state of nature to civil society and Montesquieu's comparative approach—in order to identify their coinciding and contrasting points.

1.1. THE STATE OF NATURE: A MODEL FOR THE STEP CHANGE

In Locke's opinion, all economic relations form part of the comprehensive state of nature in which all property is developed according to a set of moral rules established by God—*i.e.*, previous to all law (Henry, 1999). In this natural freedom there is no restriction other than those imposed by natural law (Locke, 1690, p. 69-70). Locke deduces that as long as mankind respects these limits of sufficiency and spoilage, this first state of nature will supply land and resources for everyone.³ These delimitations of the law of property are not defined by the quantity held by each person but by the consequences of this possession. The apparition of money situates us in the second stage of nature because it allows us to overcome both limitations. On the one hand, mankind find ways of storing their excess products, exchanging perishable goods for other more durable products that can be used in the future. On the other hand, it is possible to find a way to earn a living through commercial exchange even when all common land has been occupied. The population growth and production are responsible for the end of self-sufficiency, the introduction of money is a factor that incremented the already growing inequality.⁴ Locke considers that this problematic

3 This absence of scarcity doesn't necessarily imply abundance or absence of specialization or exchange (Vaughn, 1985, p. 5). Locke also argues that in the state of nature there was no incentive for a person to attempt to accumulate more property than they could use themselves, since the majority of goods were perishable.

4 Money allows the most "laborious and rational" persons to accumulate the products of their work and, in consequence, increment their wealth regarding to those who are less laborious or talented. Additionally, the growing accumulation of physical properties and of land limits the natural resources and makes it much less feasible that a person

situation is adequately compensated for by the benefits of the market economy; once money is converted into a representation of the actual wealth accumulated, the increase of the total wealth of the members of a community is sure. Also, this overcoming of the limits imposed by the land factor on economic activity improves everybody's situation:

un Roi en Amérique, qui possède de très amples et très fertiles districts, est plus mal nourri, plus mal logé, et plus mal vêtu, que n'est en Angleterre et ailleurs un ouvrier à la journée (Locke, 1690, p. 98).

Therefore, monetary economy implies the rupture of the physical limitations that the previous natural state imposed on the growing population.

The progressive concentration and amplitude of the property implies the end of the certainty that no one will be affected adversely by the same. Locke maintains that the consequences of this will consist in an increment of conflict and of uncertainty about the use and benefit of the properties (Locke, 1690, p. 235). Locke doesn't seem to describe a situation of growing transaction costs in the accumulation process as much as one of growing uncertainty; there is not a problem of information or cost, but of capacity of conflict resolution. Thus, mankind will find great advantages in the agreement of a contract and establishment of a Government that situates us in the following state of civil society.

According to Meek (1971), stage theories are based on the problem of the origin of property in the successive stages drawn from the natural law tradition. The question aroused by the debate in the literature is whether this relationship between jurisprudence and historical stages really implies that systems of laws and government can be explained by economic causes. The *materialist interpretation* holds that the social process is entirely secular and material (Pascal, 1838, p. 171), whereas the *legislative focus* considers that it is a demonstration of how the law and governments adapt to the forms of property ownership in each social state (Winch, 2013, p. 13).

To delimit the relationship between the natural law tradition and the Enlightenment stadial histories, we began by highlighting that, as we shall see, Locke's account does not just share the use of historical stages. It is possible to identify other concepts of the model of the

might find "sufficient land and of good enough quality" after the appropriation of everyone else.

state of nature—*i.e.*, self-sufficiency, inequality, the introduction of currency—which the authors use in each one of their *stadial histories*. Therefore, the economic questions related to social change are not only restricted to the means of subsistence.

Secondly, Turgot, Smith and Steuart differ from the most essential aspects of these authors with respect to natural jurisprudence.⁵ On the one hand, Turgot and Smith do not consider the existence of moral rules in the primitive state.⁶ Quite the opposite, in these primitive stages passions, both “douces” and “tumultueuses”, have a principal role in the generation of knowledge instead of reason: “*ainsi les passions ont multiplié les idées, étendu les connaissances, perfectionné les esprits, au défaut de la raison dont le jour n’était pas venu et qui eut été moins puissante si elle eût régné plus tôt*” (Turgot, 1750a, p. 168). Therefore, the social institutions adopted in order to live in society are not *a priori* due to the fact there is no rule of justice by which institutions can be judged. On the contrary, the question of which institutions are the most apt in each social state becomes the centre of the analysis. On the other hand, the scenario of independent individuals saved from violence by the property rights of a civil society is rejected by Steuart and Smith. Steuart holds that the growth of the population creates dependence in order to subsist. Society exists, therefore, because there is dependence and, consequently, it is not possible to disconnect society from authority, since dependence always brings with it subordination (Menudo, 2013). Smith also states that political power is based on the economic dependence of the poor on the rich (Salter, 1992, p. 223). Without this subordination, it is not possible to understand the decline of feudal power and the labour relationships in commercial society (Dellemotte & Walraevens, 2015). In contrast to natural institutions stemming from the state of nature, each nation has social institutions which are the result of a historical process; in other words, in accordance with the series of particular circumstances that have generated permanent or temporary changes.⁷ The third critical comment is methodological—*e.g.*, Steuart refers to the

5 See Bittermann (1940), Doujon (1994) and Ravix & Romani (1997).

6 In John Locke’s work, and later in that of François Quesnay, people can both perceive these moral rules as well as learn to follow them—moral freedom is a synonym of intelligence and an antonym of animal freedom.

7 “*C’est dans l’histoire qu’il faut donc chercher les droits des rois; ils ne sont pas fondés sur la supposition d’un contrat tacite entr’eux et le peuple, déduit des principes d’une loi imaginaire de*

imaginary laws of nature. Using the Newtonian “experimental” method, knowledge could be built through the systematic study of experience (detailed historical study) combined with reason (Montes, 2006). Since an explanation has to be ordered and structured, Conjectural History replaces the facts with conjectures drawn from collateral facts supplied by historians or “considering in what manner they are likely to have proceeded, from the principles of their nature” (Steward, 1793, p. 293). In short, the study of man needs to make inferences derived from two anchors: constant principles of human nature—*e.g.*, a constant desire for the material requirements of well-being in Steuart, an innate innovative ability in Turgot or the natural tendency towards exchange in Smith (Skinner, 1993)—and historical circumstances (Redman, 1997). Although Conjectural History became the methodological base for stage theories (Berry, 2013), Scottish scepticism is not a necessary condition. While Hume observed in the past more arbitrary events than recurring causes, Turgot contemplates how the collection of historical facts forms a regular chain of causes and effects that enable him to set out a stage history without giving up rationalism.⁸ Therefore, it would be better to recognize the influence of History as a science or, in Voltaire’s term, *philosophie de l’histoire*. The influence of Montesquieu may help us understand why a particular schema—*i.e.*, hunting, pasturage, agriculture and commerce—was chosen.

1.2. THE IMPACT OF MONTESQUIEU: COMPARATIVE APPROACH AND MODES OF SUBSISTENCE

Montesquieu had such an impact on the Scots partly because he did not talk of a state of nature in order to present a social contract as the basis of legitimate rules (Meek, 1976). The date of publication of *De l’Esprit* (1748) marked a period of convergence between two national enlightenments running on parallel tracks. Montesquieu presents a comparative approach for explaining a considerable part of the evolution of political and social life through economic development (Skinner, 1963; Cheney, 2010). For Smith, Turgot and Steuart, the historical explanation

la nature, qui fait tous les hommes égaux; la nature ne peut jamais être en contradiction avec la raison” (Steuart, 1767, I, p. 441-442).

8 “... tous les âges enchaînés les uns aux autres par une suite de causes et d’effets qui lient l’état présent du monde à tous ceux qui l’ont précédé”. (Turgot, 1750a, p. 214-215).

of social institutions is the key to obtain the empirical evidence that the science of man needs.⁹ Specifically, a famous paragraph in chapter VIII of book XVIII of *De l'Esprit* is very important for our subject:

Les lois ont un très grand rapport avec la façon dont les divers peuples se procurent la subsistance. Il faut un code de lois plus étendu pour un peuple qui s'attache au commerce et à la mer, que pour un peuple qui se contente de cultiver ses terres. Il en faut un plus grand pour celui-ci que pour un peuple qui vit de ses troupeaux. Il en faut un plus grand pour ce dernier que pour un peuple qui vit de sa chasse (Montesquieu, 1748, III, p. 77).

The relation between legislation and modes of subsistence may have been a key-factor for the construction of stage histories (Meek, 1976). However, Montesquieu's ideas are more an “inspiration” than an influence because there are significant differences with regard to the four-stage theory. Firstly, the superiority of the “moral causes” variables over the static “physical causes”. In explaining the causes and effects of the progress of humankind, the role of the physical causes must be minimised so that they do not overshadow the moral causes of an immutable human nature—e.g. *a constant desire for the material requirements of well-being* in the case of Steuart, *the natural tendency towards exchange* of Smith. The specificity of humankind with respect to its escape from the repetitive cycle of nature must therefore be attributed to reason, to liberty and passions, according to Turgot (Monnier, 2008; Ravix, 2014).

Secondly, no *four-stage theory* emphasises the influence of the political/constitutional sphere. Thus, commerce, according to Berry (2013, p. 39), “lined up on the same bases as the other three, that is as a distinct social state rather than a mode of political life”. The Prince was no longer the focus when explaining what had occurred to the institutions, since the key was in the behaviour of the small parts that made up the multitude.

Le choc des grands princes est moins funeste que les disputes des petits. Au milieu de leurs guerres, une partie du territoire peut encore être paisiblement cultivée. L'effort partant d'une plus grande masse, et ses coups frappant sur des masses plus grandes aussi, chaque partie souffrait un peu moins, et toutes conservaient davantage leurs situations respectives. Ce qui s'était fait en Italie fut répété dans l'Europe entière sous de grandes proportions (Turgot, 1751b, p. 325).

9 According to Meek (1971), Millar attributes Smith's “Baconian role of pioneer” to Montesquieu.

Lastly, a dynamic element is missing from this paragraph of Montesquieu. Smith, Turgot and Steuart pointed to gradual steps to explain the consequences of the historical process which had taken place over the previous 300 years in Europe. The *stadial histories* were an attempt to explain a historical process that had occurred over the preceding three centuries in Europe. There is no perception of growth in production, but an increase in commerce and manufacturing—e.g., Smith uses the expression “*une révolution qui fut si importante pour le bonheur public*” and Steuart, “*la grande révolution opérée dans les affaires de l’Europe*”. To explain its effects on society, it is possible to use stages, as occurs in the literature on natural jurisprudence, especially when the physical and political causes are reduced to a minimum. If the appearance of the theory of states is related to the field of law, can we hold that the means of subsistence is the only economic variable? If so, could we interpret this as a mere narrative framework? To answer these questions, it is necessary to examine each interpretation of the four-stage theory.

II. STADIAL HISTORIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

For *stadial histories*, the key is the historical process, since that is where it is possible to find elements or causes which explain modern society and allow us to contemplate different countries and periods in order to judge the degree of compliance with the model. It is necessary to understand by means of which gradual changes the transition took place. But beyond the known transformative effect of commerce, it is necessary to see that the perspective of progress as evidence, and not as the object of research. There was a gradual revolution or change which converted simple European nations into complex nations, and barbarian peoples into cultured societies. This is the hypothesis of progress contained in *stadial histories* and which do not require any demonstration—i.e., “a scientific credo, a value judgement” (Bryson, 1968, p. 243). Despite that fact, we should examine if such theories are significantly different.

II.1. TURGOT: THE POWER OF THE ACCUMULATION

In 1748, Turgot became aware of a competition organised by the *Académie de Soissons* to give a prize to the best answer to the question *Quelles peuvent être, dans tous temps, les causes des progrès et de la décadence du goût dans les arts et dans les sciences?*¹⁰ Since then, and for ten years, Turgot worked on a project that framed all of his intellectual activity, whether with answers to the question posed or using progress as a means to tackle the problems of other subjects.

His initial conclusions were exposed during his university stage in the *Sorbonne* over the course of 1750. A first discourse developed the theory of the relation between the Christian religion and the progress of men and societies. The second discourse abandons the central focus of human behaviour to tackle great events in the progress of humanity from the perspective of the duality between Nature and History. Nature is the world of need and determinism, where change is represented by a circular movement. History is the field of freedom and progress because it shows the innovations generated by genius and transmitted from one generation to another. Therefore, the status of language, the effects of education and politics shall be the elements that enable genius and transfer mechanisms to develop (Monnier, 2008). Likewise, it identifies a negative principle in those civilised societies where institutions—e.g. foundations, the despotism of China, or sects—, subjugate the intellectual elites, in order to set political societies in a state of immobilism.¹¹ In all of this, Turgot minimises the physical causes to leave progress in hands of moral causes based on an innate innovative ability and on the guarantee of a constant perfectibility—in fact, movement alone is sufficient to overcome chaos (Manuel & Manuel, 1979). In consequence, innovative passion causes a strong moral trend in the exercise of the sciences: “combinaison continuelle de ses progrès avec les passions et avec les événements qu’elles ont produit, forme l’*Histoire du genre humain*”

10 Although he wrote a draft called *Recherche sur les causes des progrès et de la décadence des sciences et des arts ou réflexions sur l’histoire des progrès de l’esprit humain*, Turgot did not present a text for the competition. Nobody responded to the award (see *Journal des Savans* 1749, February, p. 269).

11 The situations result in violent revolutions, to such an extent that the progress of history does not stop regardless of how much leaders or the people themselves want it to. Based on this reasoning, Turgot predicts the secession of the American colonies.

(Turgot, 1751a, p. 276). The result is a series of stages of society that do not describe a lineal or a uniform progress (Boarini, 2011). The accumulative growth of knowledge allows a society to take over in the leadership of knowledge while the former powers stagnate because the progress is not universal but national.

Having completed his university studies, and always from the approach of the progress of the human spirit, Turgot devised planes and articles about subjects that interested him particularly — political geography, universal history, physics, metaphysics, language, religion and economy.¹² In 1750, Turgot, who has a particular interest at the origin of languages, discusses in his essays on the linguistic theories of Locke and Maupertuis. In his theory of language, Turgot develops the idea of a natural evolution through three stages of development: starting in the barbarian (hunters), moving to the nomadic shepherd and finally to the sedentary farmer.

De là (suivant qu'un sens était plus exercé ou plus flatté qu'un autre, suivant qu'un objet était plus familier, plus frappant qu'un autre) sont venues les différentes langues, suivant que le peuple était chasseur, pasteur ou laboureur; et encore suivant le spectacle qu'offrait le pays. Le chasseur a dû avoir peu de mots, très vifs, peu liés et les progrès ont dû être lents; le pasteur, dans le repos, a dû faire une langue plus douce, plus polie; le laboureur, plus froide et plus suivie (Turgot, 1750b, p. 172).

These three stages correspond to dynamic changes of lifestyle and linguistic capabilities, and as a result the different languages were born from an involuntary course of social development. One year later, Turgot also seeks to explain the origin of governments and nations in *Plan de deux discours sur l'Histoire Universelle* (1751). He also makes use of the stadial theory for the task, although now at length. An initial inequality that comes from chance events enables mankind to obtain the first leap:

La vie des peuples chasseurs s'est conservée dans les parties de l'Amérique où ces espèces manquent: au Pérou, où la nature a placé une espèce de moutons appelés llamas, il s'est formé des pasteurs; et c'est vraisemblablement la raison qui fait que cette partie de l'Amérique a été policée plus aisément (Turgot 1751a, p. 279).

12 However, art remains on the margin of progress (Manuel & Manuel 1979). Artistic knowledge, unlike mechanical or scientific knowledge, is not accumulative and, consequently, the principle of progress is not applicable to these disciplines (Turgot, 1748, p. 118).

Scarcity is not the problem. Moving to the pastoral stage required to discover the benefit of domestic animals. This new way of life involves a series of changes that enormously modifies societies: “*Les peuples pasteurs, ayant leur subsistance plus abondante et plus assurée, ont été plus nombreux. Ils ont commencé à être plus riche et à connaître davantage l'esprit de propriété*” (Turgot, 1751a, p. 282). Likewise, the transition from pastoral society to agricultural society requires cultivable land and the discovery of the plough. Once again, the change in livelihood involves a radical transformation of society.

De plus, la terre nourrit chez eux bien plus d'homme qu'il n'en faut pour la cultiver. De là, des gens oisifs; de là, les villes, le commerce, tous les arts d'utilité et de simple agrément; de là, les progrès plus rapides en tout genre, car tout suit la marche générale de l'esprit; de là, une habileté plus grande dans la guerre que celle des barbares; de là, la séparation des professions, l'inégalité des hommes (...) (Turgot, 1751a, p. 282).

According to Ravix (2013), this social development has two important consequences. First, it is necessary to strengthen the civil laws in order to secure the property rights, and in particular the ownership of land that originally could be acquired only by labour.¹³ Second, the surplus causes a material inequality and brings about a greater division of tasks.¹⁴

Finally, the movement from the agricultural stage to the commercial society requires the generalization of the exchange by means of the market. The fourth step is added in *Réflexions* (1766) regarding the origin of social stratification. From the first stage, perishable goods are considered assets due to their value as exchangeable objects that boost, thanks to experience, the division of labour and the efficiency of cultivation. But now, it is required the widespread use of money.

Plus l'argent tenait lieu de tout, plus chacun pouvait, en se livrant uniquement à l'espèce de culture ou d'industrie qu'il avait choisie, se débarrasser de tout soin pour subvenir à ses autres besoins, et ne penser qu'à se procurer le plus d'argent qu'il pourrait

13 Later on, in *Mémoire sur les Mines et Carrieres* (1764), Turgot detailed its content: labour is established as the criterion to turn the right of the first occupant into the property right: “Elle n’a point borne sa garantie aux terrains enclos: un sentiment d’équité naturelle, très-conforme aux intérêts de la société, a fait regarder le travail de la culture comme une occupation suffisante pour assurer la propriété légale d’un héritage et la possession de ses fruits” (Turgot, 1764, p. 367).

14 The inevitable inequality is both the constitutive bonds of society and the indispensable condition for the progress of mankind (Turgot, 1753-1754, p. 439).

par la vente de ses fruits ou de son travail, bien sûr, avec cet argent, d'avoir tout le reste: c'est ainsi que l'usage de l'argent a prodigieusement bâti les progrès de la société (Turgot, 1766, p. 563).

Turgot holds that this new way of capital accumulation makes possible an improvement in relation with an agricultural society. The implementation of industrial production process imposes a series of technical and organizational constraints that could not be achieved without a prior and significant accumulation of capital (Turgot, 1766, p. 598). This division of labour is materialized by means of three social classes: entrepreneurs, capitalists and labourers. The result is a radical change in the functioning of society because the landowners no longer occupy the key-place, but the *entrepreneur*. Turgot adopts an approach to link the division of labour up to the organization of production. Therefore, the essential category is not the market, but the reproduction of the economy (Ravix & Romani, 1997).

II.2. ADAM SMITH: THE POWER OF HUMAN PROPENSITIES

As indicated in the classic work by Henry Bittermann, it is impossible to explain these “bounds of all the European Kingdoms” without reference to David Hume, even though he does not use a *four-stage theory*. In relation to these “Bounds of all the European Kingdoms”, Hume adds fresh material although he does not have a “stadial theory”. The concepts used by David Hume in his essay on luxury—e.g., the class division, the intersection of industry and agriculture, the dependence on or economic consequences of luxury goods—describes the step-change from rude unpolished nations to complicated and cultivated societies:

En effet, lorsqu'on observe avec attention les nations grossières et sans police, où les arts sont inconnus, on y voit la culture de la terre être l'unique travail et la seule industrie du peuple. Les habitants n'y sont partagés qu'en deux classes, l'une composée des propriétaires des terres, et l'autre de leurs vassaux ou fermiers. Ces derniers, ne possédant aucunes richesses, naissent nécessairement dans la dépendance, et sont élevés dans l'esclavage et dans la soumission; l'ignorance entière et absolue de toute espèce d'arts, dans laquelle est plongée la nation, les empêche même d'en être considérés par leur habileté dans l'agriculture. Les premiers, c'est-à-dire les propriétaires des terres, s'érigent naturellement, dans ces pays barbares, en petits tyrans, et sont forcés, pour le maintien de l'ordre et de la tranquillité publique, de se choisir parmi eux un souverain absolu et indépendant. Peut-être que, semblables aux anciens barons goths, ils voudront conserver leur indépendance mutuelle;

mais il s'élèvera bientôt entre eux des disputes et des animosités, qui répandront dans la nation un trouble et une confusion plus insupportables, peut-être, que le gouvernement le plus despotique. Dans les pays, au contraire, où le luxe anime le commerce et l'industrie, les paysans s'enrichissent par la culture de la terre, et cessent d'être esclaves. On voit paraître en même temps des marchands et des négociants, qui forment une classe mitoyenne et nouvelle dans la société, et qui devenus, par les profits de leur commerce, propriétaires de quelques portions de terre, acquièrent de la considération et de l'autorité parmi leurs concitoyens, et deviennent, par la succession des temps, la base la plus solide et la plus durable de la liberté publique (Hume, 1752, p. 277).

Hume divides the economy into two sectors: agriculture and industry, based on the ability of the former to generate more food than necessary. The new preferences for products manufactured abroad boost development. Imports introduce agricultural workers to the market as food sellers, through their surplus production, and as buyers of manufacture.

Beyond the discussion about the origin of commercial nations, the emergence of stage histories in Scotland is associated to jurisdictional problems.¹⁵ According to the dates of publication, *An essay towards a general history of feudal property in Great Britain* (1758) John Dalrymple oriented the four stages description towards the problem of property and *Historical Law Tracts* (1758) by Lord Kames extended the account to four stages:

It is lucky, that among rude people, in the first stages of government, the necessity of engagements is not greater than their authority. Originally every family subsisted by hunting, and by the natural fruits of the earth. The taming wild animals, and rendering them domestic, multiplied greatly the means of subsistence. The invention of agriculture produced to the industrious superfluity, with which foreign necessities were purchased. Commerce, originally, was carried on by barter or permutation, to which previous covenant is not necessary. And after the use of money was known, we have reason to believe, that buying and selling also was at first carried on in the same manner, *viz.* by exchange of goods and money, without any previous covenant. But in the progress of the social life, the wants and appetites of individuals multiply faster than to be readily supplied by species of Commerce so narrow and confined (Kames, 1758, p. 92-93).

15 Muller (1993) considers Smith employed a four-stage theory based on a taxonomy suggested by Lord Kames in 1758, while Meek (1971) dated back the Smith's version to the winter of 1750-1751 and, therefore, his *Lectures* becomes the antecedent to the mature works of the Scottish historical School, appeared in the 1760s and 1770s—and more in particular, Lord Kames and Adam Ferguson identifies the standard three stage (Berry, 2013).

In the same way, Smith refers in his *Glasgow Lectures* (1762-1763) to “four distinct states”, called hunting, pasturage, farming and commerce. Before dealing with the right of property, Smith introduces both the ages of mankind and the reason of change from one state to another. The increasing in population, and resulting scarcity force the savage nations of hunters to use the pasturage—under the conditions of having domestic animals. The same movement also occurs towards the agricultural stage although in this case “skill and observation would be required” (Smith, 1762-1763, p. 15). The last stage—i.e., the commercial society—can only be achieved when the division of labour leads to the generalization of the exchange by means of both the market and the foreign trade:

As society was farther improved, the several arts, which at first would be exercised by each individual as far as was necessary for his welfare, would be separated; some persons would cultivate one and others, as they severally inclined. They would exchange with one another what they produced more than was necessary for their support, and get in exchange for them the commodities they stood in need of and did not produce themselves. This exchange of commodities extends in time not only betwixt the individuals of the same society but betwixt those of different nations (Smith, 1762-1763, p. 15-16).

Each of these four stages has its own material, legal, social, and moral characteristics. In consequence, it is possible to explain the progress of the institution of property, among others, by means of a comparative approach.¹⁶ Smith also makes use of stage histories to set out “the forms of government which are in use in different societies and the manner in which they have arose”, specifically by means of the progress of three social powers: legal, juridical and “the power of making peace or war” (Smith, 1762-1763, p. 200s). Finally, as Maria Pia Paganelli (2015) summarizes, “Opulence is inexorably linked with good governance, the presence of the rule of law and of a good administration of justice”.

However, the context of the four stage theory is not limited to property right in 1762. Regarding the authenticity of the poems of Ossian, Hugh Blair mentions in a literary framework the four stages of society:

¹⁶ Hunter-gatherers (savages) have slavery and physical strength as marks of distinction, while shepherds (barbarians) begin to recognize property. In agricultural societies there is the development of property in land that culminates with commercial societies (politeness). In a commercial society, we find a fully developed legal system.

The compositions of Ossian are so strongly marked with characters of antiquity, that although there were no external proof to support that antiquity, hardly any reader of judgment and arte, could hesitate in referring them to a very remote era. There are four great stages through which men successively pass in the progress of society. Initially, the first and earliest is the life of hunters; pasturage succeeds to this, as the ideas of property begin to take root next, agriculture; and lastly, commerce (Blair, 1763, p. 16-17).

Blair accepts Turgot's statement of the poems of Ossian. In the years of the first publication of the poems, Turgot published a translation into French of two of the poems because the Ossian myth—an example of barbarian literature—had confirmed his stadial theory of language.¹⁷

Cet exemple est une nouvelle preuve, ajoutée à beaucoup d'autres, de la fausseté des inductions qu'on a tirées du style des écrivains d'Asie, pour leur attribuer une imagination plus vive que celle des peuples du Nord, et pour établir l'extrême influence qu'on a voulu donner au climat sur l'esprit et le caractère des nations. Un auteur connu, peu satisfait de ce système des climats, a cherché la cause du tour d'esprit des Orientaux dans la forme de leur Gouvernement. Suivant cet auteur, les écrivains intimidés par le despotisme, et n'osant exprimer crûment des vérités désagréables, ont été forcés de les présenter sous le voile des allégories et des paraboles; et delà le style figuré est devenu le style dominant chez ces peuples. Mais cette conjecture est encore moins heureuse que l'explication fondée sur les influences du climat (Turgot, 1760, p. 142).

The gradual change in language is not explained by the climate or the political system but by a organization of society based on the means of subsistence. Smith fully subscribes Turgot's thesis in his early draft of part of *Wealth of Nations* (Smith 1790, p. 573).

In 1776 the use of the stadial theory is so common that Smith reference to the four stage in *Wealth of Nations* as “periods” (Berry, 2013). It is not event necessary to keep the chronology of stages in such a way that the comparison between “savage nation of hunter” and “civilized nations” is the usual procedure of explanation—e.g., the division of labour (Chapter II, book I), the component parts of the price of the commodities (Chapter VI, book I) or the progress of opulence (Chapter VI, book III). The complete sequence of hunting, pasturage, farming and commerce is only used to explain two social institutions: the Army and the subordination to the law.¹⁸

17 On Suard translation of Ossian's poems, see Carboni (2004).

18 Smith tackles the subject by means of historical analysis of different types of subordinations in society—i.e. personal quality and attributes, superiority of fortunes, superiority of births.

In order to explain the origin of the commercial society, Smith makes use of Hume's "*doux commerce*" thesis (Smith, 1776, III, p. 66-67). The movement from "savage nation of hunter" to "civilized nations" is rooted in the desire of men to satisfy their vanity; but once initiated by trade, vanity develops itself according to a cumulative process. The economic evolution of the society still appears as the unintended consequence created by the imagination that individuals have deployed solely to satisfy their passions. The introduction of foreign trade, alongside the division of labour, is sufficient to explain the transition from a society dominated by agriculture to a commercial society. However, there is a clear distinction between Adam Smith, who presents history as a preface to understand the exchange economy, and David Hume who describe an integral process giving rise to a commercial state (Skinner, 1993). Smith proposes a model that would exploit the possibilities of a commercial society for the well-being of the individuals (Muller, 1993). Therefore, the progress of nations is not guaranteed because the four-stage is a model, or more specifically, a guidebook for legislators. Some nations have regressed from high to lower states due to the fact that they have not followed this guide. For example, the passage of the agricultural society to the commercial society in Europe did not follow "the natural course of things" because of the policy of Europe (Skinner, 1993) and as a result the progress of European nations has been slow:

Le commerce & les manufactures des villes furent donc, dans la plus grande partie de l'Europe, la cause & non l'effet de l'amélioration & de la culture des campagnes. Cependant, comme cet ordre est contraire au cours naturel des choses, les progrès en furent nécessairement lents & incertains (Smith, 1776, III, p. 82).

II.3. SIR JAMES STEUART: SUBORDINATIONS AND ARTIFICIAL INSTITUTIONS

Steuart takes as the starting point of his inquiry the concepts used by Hume in his essay on luxury—e.g., class division, the intersection of industry and agriculture, the dependence on or economic consequences of luxury goods. Hume divides the economy into two sectors: agriculture and industry, the latter a result of the ability of the former to produce more food than necessary. The new preferences for products manufactured abroad foster development. Imports insert agricultural workers into the market as food sellers, through their surplus production, and as buyers of manufactured goods. Steuart takes this same scene as a

reference although trade does not according to him stem from agricultural surplus. The hunter-gatherer stage is the first point in time in which there is a scarcity of productive resources because nature does not provide enough for an increasing population. Without offering any clues as to the transition from one stage to another, Steuart presents an agrarian society with two social classes: those who live from the fruit of the earth without working, and those who need to work to survive:

Par cette opération, nous voyons le genre humain divisé en deux classes: l'une de ceux qui, sans travailler, vivent des productions spontanées de la terre, telles que le lait, le bétail, la chasse etc.; l'autre de ceux qui sont obligés de cultiver le sol. La première chose qu'il faut faire maintenant, est de déterminer ce qui devrait naturellement obliger l'homme à travailler, et quels en sont les effets par rapport à la multiplication. J'ai déjà dit que le principe de la génération était naturel à l'homme, et l'excitait à la multiplication. Un autre principe aussi naturel à l'esprit que l'autre l'est au corps, c'est l'amour de soi, ou l'amour du repos et du bonheur, qui excite ceux qui se sentent quelque supériorité, personnelle ou politique, à sa prévaloir de tous leurs avantages naturels (Steuart, 1767, I, p. 38-39).

Personal interest and natural inequalities generate a social relationship characterized by a surplus produced by a working class, which enables another sector of the population to live without working. Firstly, a relationship of dependence appears because workers need to cultivate the land for their subsistence. Secondly, there is no motivation among workers to produce more than they need to survive. Therefore, the working class needs an additional push to create a surplus. The added element stems from the power of or subordination to the landowners:

Ici de nouvelles idées se présentent relativement aux principes généraux de la subordination et de la dépendance parmi les hommes. Je les sou mets au jugement du lecteur. Comme ces termes sont relatifs, il est bon d'observer que la subordination suppose une autorité des supérieurs sur les inférieurs, et que, dans la dépendance, sont compris certains avantages que les inférieurs tirent de leur subordination: un domestique est subordonné à son maître, et dépend de lui pour sa subsistance (Steuart 1767, I, p. 436-437).

Dependence and subordination are present in all historical phases, albeit with varying intensity. The principle of dependence refers to the personal advantage of a life in society, which does not stem from cooperation between equals. Consequently, social relations always entail authority. Equality between individuals, Steuart asserts, has never existed because

society as a whole is composed of a union of hierarchical relationships. Natural dependence, such as the relationship between parents and children, is now extended alongside political dependence, which implies subordination via property laws or legal obligations, first present in the form of slavery and then, through the influence of Christianity, under the feudal system (Steuart 1767, I, p. 40).

Regardless of the political system, the time of the agricultural stage is defined by the first moment of scarcity and an evident “moral incapacity to increase its number”. The latter would be the case of those who, availing of potential agricultural resources, generate an agricultural surplus that increases the population to a level where one section is devoted to manufacture. The moral incapacity of the inhabitants to increase the demand will establish the limit that prevents production from increasing. As a result, two social working classes appear—agricultural and industrial—in a proportion determined by the agricultural surplus. The moral incapacity disappears when feudalism declines on account of the appearance of money and sumptuary consumption.

The discovery of America and the East Indies brings luxury and trade to the Royal Households. Emulating the Crown, the nobility increases their demand of superfluous goods. But the purchase of goods not produced by their lands means greater quantities of money. The solution is to replace vassalage by payments in cash and the result is a loss of authority, bringing about the collapse of the existing social order. Although the division of classes is one of the initial elements of the analysis, for Steuart, important economic change appears with the institutional organisation that guides production. There is no natural trend towards exchange that promotes the division of labour and, therefore, enables commercial society to be a consequence of human nature. For Steuart, the institutional organisation that we call a market economy is the consequence of an artificial construction and has its origin in the demand of superfluous products. Steuart avoids the use of the term *commercial society* and only nations that have decided to be commercial appear; in other words, nations that have introduced “the system of trade and commerce”, in which production is completely managed by traders—as a result it is also called a “system of trade and industry”.

Steuart highlights, in particular, the artificial nature of these institutions by presenting merchants as creators, responsible for implementing

“the system of trade and commerce” in other places. As Adam Smith would do later, Steuart uses the example of a pin factory to explain the economic change involved in the new institutional organisation for production. Steuart focuses on the new relationship between producer and consumer, contrary to the form of production caused by the division of labour in Adam Smith. He explains that now the producer sells all the production to the merchant, who (i) satisfies more distant clients, (ii) detects excesses in supply or demand in the sectors, (iii) transfers this information to the producers via public markets, and (iv) avoids the problems that lead consumers to acquire goods directly from the producer (Steuart, 1767, I, p. 332-333). The process continues when the system of trade and commerce, which merchants were already executing in their countries of origin, spreads to other nations. Chapter V of the second Book of his *Principles of Political Economy* is exclusively dedicated to the merchants’ process of introducing a trade described as “active”, since it is not limited to providing goods that arise from the needs of families, or to generating new wants. With the help of correspondents and producers, the merchant devises the means to generate a sumptuary consumption demand, in accordance with the customs of each town and with initial prices according to the ability to pay, and not the cost.

Beyond the purpose for that the artifice is created, Steuart presents the important modifications of the social relationships entailed by the system. The imitation of the nobility and the ‘aspiration effect’ of workers lead the system to spread to society as a whole, until the consumption of luxury goods becomes a habit. Steuart considers needs to be accumulative and unlimited, in such a way that ostentatious consumption in the present later becomes a need—known as “political necessities” to differentiate them from those needs stemming from subsistence—for every social class. Although the boost in the demand generates unlimited possibilities for growth, the generalisation of the desire for products requires a greater industrial population involved in exchanges and a greater surplus of the agricultural producer to feed the whole population (Steuart, 1767, I, p. 323). In this case, individuals are linked by another type of dependence, known as “commercial”, which coordinates them through relations of exchange. Now the law is not the element that forces workers to produce more than necessary to survive, and in its place is the desire for goods that are not necessary for survival:

L'argent n'est pas plutôt introduit dans un pays, qu'il devient, comme je l'ai déjà dit, un objet universel de besoin pour tous les habitants, d'où il résulte que les ouvriers libres d'un état, qui, avoient cessé de travailler, parce que tous leurs besoins étaient satisfaits, ayant, devant leurs yeux, ce nouvel objet d'ambition, tâchent, en perfectionnant leurs ouvrages, d'éloigner jusqu'aux moindres inconvénients qui accompagnent la simplicité des mœurs (Steuart, 1767, I, p. 328).

Money fosters a generalised desire for the superfluous that leads to the need to generate a surplus with which exchange can be performed. Now the free individual is subordinate to a “system of trade and commerce” that provides him with both luxury goods and money to buy them.¹⁹ The result is an exchange economy in which all types of assets will circulate.

FINAL REMARKS

Stadial histories are not theories of economic development, but a diachronic, materialist explanation of social institutions—e.g. language, the army, property, authority. It is the product of a reaction to arguments over institutions deduced from a non-social state. For many authors, such an argument is not acceptable for it deals with dynamically modified forms and only this historical process can explain them and the social naturalism of Quesnay is, therefore, incompatible with the four-stage theory. Progress in a leap to another social state does not necessarily imply an improvement in living conditions (this responsibility remains in the hands of politicians), but merely from the familiar to something more complex. Those authors choose to illustrate changes in the organisation of society using elements that fit the perspective of the individual as part of the many—scarcity, division of labour, the use of money or malleable virtues. Why are there several stages? The influence of Montesquieu may help us to understand why a particular schema of progress—i.e., hunting, pasturage, agriculture and commerce—was chosen. The key role of the means of subsistence is explained by the superiority of variable moral causes over static physical causes—or forms of government, because

19 “Il paraît, d'après ces principes, qu'autrefois l'esclavage produisoit le même effet par rapport à la population, que produisent aujourd'hui le commerce et l'industrie” (Steuart, 1767, I, p. 72).

the political dimension does not exist or it is the consequence of a new social organisation. Subsistence is the only physical cause admitted to explain the progress of mankind and never as a limit—*i.e.*, mankind is always able to find an alternative mode of subsistence. It is necessary to attach importance to moral causes because individuals have always been able to escape the repetitive cycles of Nature and any other restriction.

Within the same framework, Turgot, Steuart and Smith present three different dynamic principles in their four-stage theory. In Turgot, there is an innate ability to innovate and even simple movement is enough to overcome chaos. In Smith, the natural tendency to improve the condition guarantees movement. In the case of Steuart, shocks are always the beginning of a new stage of society. Each author also emphasizes a specific element within each stage. Turgot describes those institutions that prevent genius from developing, Smith and Steuart demonstrate the effects of the unforeseen consequences of individual actions and show the new social relationships of subordination. A third difference between these theories is the necessary condition for the step-change to a commercial society. Turgot requires the accumulation of capital—the division of labour is not the consequence of a natural tendency towards exchange—, Smith points out the role of the market—the division of labour does not need the accumulation of capital—and Steuart sets out how artificial institutions change passions—there exists no natural desire to change passions and neither does a natural desire to exchange create a surplus. Lastly, the implementation of theory is also different. Adam Smith presents the four-stage theory as a theoretical preface to the exchange economy in order to contrast it everywhere. However, Turgot and Steuart present a historical process that explains the origin of social institutions in Europe, enabling us to go to different countries and periods to assess their degree of performance.

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