Every major theme in eighteenth-century political thought is covered in a series of essays that analyze the relationship between "race" and "progress" in the Scottish Enlightenment. To my mind, for the Scottish literati — Smith, Ferguson, Robertson, Millar and Kames — the first choice was evident, a matter of taste and curiosity that deeply distinguished Enlightenment from the racist discourse of Voltaire. Though polygenism became a part of the historical discourse during the Enlightenment, it would only develop into a scientific and systematic program of research during the Nineteenth century.

John Pinkerton and Lord Kames, the subjects of this essay, advocated more systematically than anybody else in eighteenth-century Scotland the existence of a plurality of human species. They were, nonetheless, extremely different writers and individuals. While still very young, Pinkerton emigrated to London in search of literary fame. But he remained at the margins of cultural life, in spite of an ambitious project he conceived with Edward Gibbon to collect and republish all the British ancient chronicles and documents. This plan, in fact, as Pinkerton himself lamented in 1794, became "a design frustrated" by Gibbon's "sudden and unexpected death".[6] Historian, antiquarian, philologist, and collector of coins and ballads, Pinkerton was not yet thirty years old when he published his polemical Dissertation on the Origin and Progress of the Scythians or Goths in 1787.[7] On the contrary, Henry Home, Lord Kames (1713-1808), a judge of the Court of Session of Edinburgh, was well known and famous in Great Britain, when, at the age of eighty, he published his Sketches of the History of Man. He was the patron of the most of the Scottish literati, from Adam Smith to John Millar, and participated in their speculations. The Sketches were - as Kames affirmed in the "Preface" - his "magnum opus", which summed up the work of more than thirty years, appearing as a kind of compendium and completion of his previous writings. However, the polygenetic speculations of Kames and Pinkerton have been defined by Colin Kidd as "the eighteenth-century Scottish legacy to nineteenth-century racism" - an indictment of the crucial role played by the Scots in "the incubation of racial thought".[8] Both Kames and Pinkerton strictly bound the analysis of historical progress with the theory of racial differences. Both applied the polygenetic argument to the racial distinctions within Europe itself. Foropposing reasons, both arrived at this approach from enquiries into Scottish origins, of profound interest in the British debate at the end of the eighteenth century.

1. The terms "polygenism" and "monogenism" both appeared for the first time in 1857 in the writings of the Philadelphia anthropological school. They summed up two competing explanations of differences in human kind, based on opposing views about its ancestral origins. These explanations had an important history of their own: polygenism was associated to the Mosaic Account and defended the unity of the origins of human "races", polygenesis emerged for the first time between the XVI and the XVII centuries in the exegetical writings of Isaac La Peyrière, as well as in Paracelsus, Giordano Bruno, and later in François Bernier and William Petty. The idea that different "species" of men derived from different progenitors had a growing impact during the Enlightenment, notably in the polemic writings of Voltaire. Though polygenism became a part of the historical discourse during the Enlightenment, it would only develop into a scientific and systematic program of research during the Nineteenth century.[1]

2. What brings Kames and Pinkerton close was actually their common way of addressing a contrast, which John Pocock's Barbarism and Religion reads as the driving force behind the "Enlightened narrative moving into the narrative of Europe as world empire".[9] In light of the difficulties in applying the stage theory to the static American savages - Pocock maintains - the European philosopher, Montesquieu's functional principles in the dynamic and progressive scheme of the totality of human society had not occurred in the New World; second, that New World history must be interpreted under a different succession of stages; or third, that Rousseau's critique of progress was correct.[10] To my mind, for the Scottish literati — Smith, Ferguson, Robertson, Millar and Kames — the first evidence was evident, a matter of fact. Rousseau's critique of European civilization was displaced from the beginning by the new idea of history, which introduced Monastez's functional principles in the dynamic and progressive scheme of the totality of human society. The second alternative was in general disregarded; only Kames hinted at this, when he stressed the complete absence in America of the pastoral stage, and the climatic inversions of the New continent - in which the torrid zones seemed the most developed - in respect to the Old, where only the temperate regions were advanced.[11] Nonetheless, Kames was developing a fourth alternative, not contemplated in this scheme. The Sketches of the History of Man affirmed, in fact, both Kames' understanding of history as progress and his belief in the complete absence of the human species. The contrast between the inertia and immobility of non-European savages and the dynamism of the Europeans constituted the turning point where emerging discourses about "race" and history as "progress" converged, both in Lord Kames and John Pinkerton.

In this sense, the comparison between Kames and Pinkerton can be a useful instrument to analyse and better define the relationship between "race" and "progress" in the Scottish Enlightenment. What emerges is the tension between universalistic and hierarchic principles, which deeply distinguished Enlightenment from the racist thought of Nineteenth century. This
3. In his analysis of “national characters”, David Hume gave a crucial lesson to the Scottish \textit{literati}: opposing to Montesquieu’s climatic theory, he played down the importance of physical causes in favour of an explanation that we could define as inherently sociological.\cite{12} For Hume, different forms of government, the wealth or poverty of states, the economy, and revolutions of public affairs all have profound effects on the temper and genius of peoples and lead to specific national characters, which are preserved regardless of climate and environment. Manners, as well as languages and cultures, are founded in a nation and retain their character all over the world: that’s why English, French, Dutch and Spanish colonies exhibited the distinctive characteristics of their mothers, even in the Tropics. Once the principal differences in the “national characters” are put in the different chronicles and the delineation of historical development, the necessary starting point of progress seems to be based on the following assumption: while varying environmental, material and historical circumstances differentiate peoples in the more advanced and refined stages of evolution, they are homogeneous and uniform at earlier stages of development.\cite{13} As William Robertson puts it in his \textit{History of America}, “the disposition and manner of men are formed by their situation, and by the society in which they live. The moment that begins to vary, the character of a people must change. […] There is nothing wonderful then in the similitude between the Americans and the barbarous nations of our continent”\cite{11} The character of a hunter in America differs very little from an Asiatic, who depends on hunting for subsistence, or from a savage tribe on Danube’s banks, he wrote. Adam Ferguson coherently applied this logic to the key issue of liberty in his \textit{History of Civil Society}: all barbarous peoples, he affirmed, are ardent supporters of liberty and courageous in consequence of a society characterised by equality and independence. This was a broad generalisation, based on Hume’s theorization of the “uniformity” of human nature. It contains the principle of the universality of progress: the “native” Americans, who mirrored the ancient Europeans, as Locke suggested, could in Ferguson’s theoretical reasoning trace the same path of the Europeans through progressive steps. Nothing distinguished a “German or Briton, in the habits of his mind or his body, in his manners or apprehensions, from an American, who like him, with his bow and his dart, is left to traverse the forest”\cite{13}

4. It is exactly this principle of universality and generalisation that Lord Kames intended to question in 1774 in his \textit{Sketches of the History of Man}. Though he extensively applied the stage theory as an explanation of the “common” progress of peoples and human societies, Kames emphasises the heterogeneous aspects of historical development. Thus, refraining deliberately from Ferguson, Kames affirmed that the love of liberty and of courage “is indeed applicable to many savage tribes, our European forefathers in particular, but not to all”,\cite{11} not to the “native” Americans, above all. The “native” Americans were not merely a savage society: their society had not developed itself and remained savage. They were therefore both an example of the first stage, and the first significant exception to the theory of progressive development, because instead of advancing, like other nations, towards a mature society and a common system, they continued in their original state of hunting and fishing.\cite{14} The savage tribes of northern America were distinguished furthermore, in Kames’ eyes, as much by their physical as by their “moral” characteristics. They were of the same colour, notwithstanding the diversity of climates under which they lived; they had no hair on their bodies; they were cowards in war, in contrast to the ancient “virile” Europeans. Finally, the American peoples were lacking in active courage and were instead capable of enduring excruciatingly peculiar physical aspects, combined with particular moral characters. These “peculiar qualities”, made the Americans the “effeminate race” of Cornelius De Pauw’s \textit{Recherches Philosophiques sur les Americains}.\cite{15} In the vast literature on the imperfect humanity of the Americans there was a recurrent “ethological” theme - suggested by Lafitau, accepted by Buffon and De Pauw, indulged upon by William Robertson - which Kames found particularly relevant: sexual frigidity.\cite{16} Sexual frigidity distinguished the Americans both from the Europeans and from all other savages. Kames emphasised that this “constitutional” feature was a cause of demographical stagnancy in America. This brings us to the theoretical framework of Smith’s desert island – the hypothetical context of the stage theory in his \textit{Lectures on Jurisprudence} in Glasgow: without the growth of population no new needs arise, and there is thus no progress to the next stage of development.\cite{17} There was no progress in America, Kames thought, because of a race deprived of sexual dynamism.

5. On the grounds of Hume’s critique of Montesquieu’s climatic theory, it was possible to move from nature to history, as Ferguson did. Kames, instead, followed the reverse trajectory: from history and society back to nature. In so doing, he emphasised the problem of progress as a narrative of human history, stressing the existing differences in development between peoples. For him, the differences in mankind could be explained only through the concept of natural differences in human species. Polygenism, thus, was the proponent of the \textit{Sketches of the History of Man}, as argued in the introductory chapter: it was history itself which demonstrated that, since the beginning, the earth was divided into small tribes with a peculiar language and that “these original tribes were different races of men, placed in proper climates, and left to form their own language”.\cite{18} In so doing, Kames expressed “the oneness of human nature in a plurality of natures”.\cite{18} His “History of the Species, in its progress from the savage state to its highest civilisation and improvement” began as a divided history: “Species related by their own nature, or by their climate, have made a rapid progress; some have proceeded more slowly; and some continue savages”.\cite{20} Kames’ polygenetic reasoning was in some respects similar to Voltaire’s argumentation: however, because he was overtly engaged in conciliating polygenism and Biblical account, he never quoted the French philosopher directly. Nonetheless, Kames conflated the terms “race” and “species” in the same way that Voltaire had. He also rejected Buffon’s definition of species: “une espèce constante et isodeme”\cite{21} arguing that it was contrary to common sense and immediate observation, as Voltaire’s fiction of the extraterrestrial discovering different kinds of men had illustrated in the opening pages of \textit{Traité de l’Physique}. As Voltaire again, Kames stated that the differences among peoples cannot be explained in terms of “varieties” within the bounds of a single species, caused by external factors such as climate or food, but rather as different species of the same genus.\cite{22} To Kames, races retain their specific characteristics even in climates diverse from their own, where they often suffer or “degenerate”.\cite{20}
6. Anyway, Voltaire’s remarks about the correspondence between the physical and intellectual capacities become in Kames a systematic and general reasoning: the “moral” differences are as strong as the physical, and equally evident. Kames’ close critique of Buffon’s anthropology is based on the self-sufficiency of the “common sense” and on the “evidence” of the race. Joining in this way the discourse on the immediate perception of physical difference among “races” to that on the immediate recognition of moral characteristics of peoples, Kames articulated the connection between national character and progress in completely different way from Ferguson. In contrast, he assumed what his cousin Hume suggested in his essay on “national characters”, which I already quoted above. Even if Hume explained the varied European national characters in sociological terms, he still found the gap between the refined European characters and the undifferentiated and primitive character of non-European peoples to be of natural origin. In the famous note added to the text in 1755, Hume maintained that “a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men”. As the language of human science was still taking shape in the eighteenth century, the remarkable words in Hume’s discussion are “nature” and “original”: they underlined that Hume did not agree with Buffon that variations within a unique human species are caused by differences in climate. These words remained in the revised and tempered form of the note added in 1777, when Hume remained from numbering the different “humanities”, but he insisted on the irreducible diversity of the Blacks. The near contemporary “Preliminary Discourse” by Kames could be read as an extended and assenting commentary on Hume’s note. Kames affirmed that the internal disposition and nature of peoples were not explicable merely in terms of climate, culture or education. An open or a closed attitude towards foreigners, bravery or cowardice, or the vices and virtues of a people could not be the products of chance, but must necessarily have a “constant and specific cause”: “the character of that greater part of mankind has no foundation but nature.” The “national characters” then acquire original and specific meanings: they become “original characters”, “racial” characters.

7. This idea was also lurking in James Macpherson’s Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland, which, attempting to provide historical foundations to the myth of Ossian, refused the theory that human history was based on the common origins of mankind. The origins of Great Britain and Ireland, on which the myth of Ossian was constructed, were in fact radically opposite to the “natural” savage states of Africa, America and Oriental Asia, as well as the crude manners of Southern Europe. The Caledonians as Celts appeared different and superior to all other nations of savages because they possessed, since the most ancient past, the traits of refinement and civility typical of modern society mingled with the heroism of warriors. In Macpherson’s case, heterodox concepts, such as polygenism, were introduced into the traditional framework. Kames, instead, devised a convergence between the idea of progress and the idea of race within the new conjectural, comparative and philosophical approach to history. Accordingly, his defence in “Progress of Manners” of the Poems of Ossian was not just another chapter in the Ossianic controversy; but, much more interestingly, a coherent discussion of a distinct and separate race. The world of Ossian constituted, in comparison to the great uniformity in manners of the other hunting peoples, the second extraordinary exception in the history of humanity, after the negative one of the Americans. The Caledonians did not fight in order to loot, nor did they, as did the Americans, make the ambush: their wars were fought in the open and with a desire for honour. Furthermore, it was not their custom to humiliate their adversary, as the Homeric heroes had done by mutilating corpses. The Caledonians were truly “our ancient forefathers”, a race where “humanity” was “blended with courage”, in clear contrast to the Americans described in the “Preliminary Discourse” and in the sketch on the “Origin and progress of American nations”. Caledonian manners, wrote Kames, “were so pure and refined as scarce to be paralleled in the most cultivated nations”. Most important, however, the Caledonians respected, esteemed, and loved their women so that they had little reason, if any, to envy modern society. Caledonians were the Scottish branch of that most remarkable “original tribe”, the Caledonian character, therefore, revealed the exceptional character of all the “Northern nations of Europe”, with a uniformity, we should say with Kames’ words, such as must be attributed to nature. While Macpherson and Kames differed on some details, progress shaped a “human” geography for both, and they converged in constructing the picture of a Nordic race, preserved in its greatest purity in the Scottish Highlands. Ossian described an ideal civilization that, exported by the Celts of the Gallia to Great Britain, found refuge on the mountains, remaining uncorrupted and untouched from invasions. Kames, in this way, claimed that “our forefathers were not such barbarians as they are commonly held to be”. And if he did not deny the coarse conditions of modern Highlanders, he pointed out that “yet in that people are discernible many remaining features of their forefathers the Caledonians”.

8. John Pinkerton laughed at the “panegyrics of the Celtiae, and as how they were both neat and handsome”. Despite his beginnings as a writer of Ossianic verses, Pinkerton made a strong effort to discredit the historical background to The Poems of Ossian, laying the foundation for the influential critique “Dissertation on the supposed authenticity of Ossian’s Poems”, by Malcolm Laing, which has recently been noted as “the most dedicated Scottish anti-Ossianist”. Recognizing Pinkerton as the inspiration for his work, Laing showed the paradox of Macpherson’s reconstruction: “in ascribing such primeval refinement to the first, and rudest stage of society, we must believe that the highlanders degenerated on emerging from the savage state, and became more barbarous in proportion as they became more civilized.” However, Pinkerton went much farther than Laing in his critique of the Ossianic myth, not limiting himself to the historical aspect, but articulating a clearly racial and racist ideology. The fundamental assumptions that Pinkerton shared with the other polygenists inspired in his “Dissertation on the Origin and Progress of the Scythians or Goths”, which elaborated how Europe had been peopled since the earliest times. Macpherson and Kames would have completely assented to Pinkerton’s statement that the differences between a Tartar, a Negro, an American and a German were as radical as those which distinguished “a bull-dog, or lap-dog, or shepherd’s cur, from a pointer” – following the recurring topos in polygenetic view of the comparison between dogs’ and human races, firstly inaugurated by William Petty. Pinkerton thought, in fact, that it was a scientific postulate.
9. Nonetheless, Pinkerton’s application of these principles to Europe, which Kames himself already had done, revealed strong differences in their thinking. The Dissertation started with the assumption that “there were in ancient Europe only four Grand Races”: the Celts, the most ancient inhabitants of Europe, originating in Ireland; the Iberi of Spain and Aquitania, who were Mauri (Moors) and came from Africa; the Semitae (Slavs), who probably lived in the south-west Tartary, but were expelled by the Tartars; and the Scythians or Goths, for Pinkerton a single people, who originated in present Persia and spread from thence throughout almost all of Europe. The Celts, far from being the brave and generous warriors described by Modern Geography, were not having taken even a step out of savagery. Their civilization was rude, and their manners fully mirrored the state in which they lived. Their mythology and poetry, mostly unknown, probably “resembled that of the Hottentots, or others of the rudest savages” For Pinkerton, the Celtic peoples replaced the Americans as the link between men and animals. In this way, he completely upset Kames’ paradigm and made the Osianic heroes the savages of Europe, a people “not yet advanced even to a stage of civilization”. It was not necessary to read the travel literature of remote non-European countries, or to see American and African “natives”; it was enough to step into the Celtic part of Wales, Ireland, or Scotland, “for they are just as they were, incapable of industry or civilisation” In the Dissertation, polygenism and the question of race ceased to be exotic arguments and definitively took their place as the fundamental keys for understanding the different progress of societies within Europe.

10. Pinkerton launched his opposition to the myth of Ossian from a methodological approach that profoundly differed from the mainstream of the new Scottish historiography. Both Pinkerton and the Scottish literati considered the progress of European civilization an “objective” fact, particularly manifest in its system of polite manners. Pinkerton, however, considered manners to be the most uncertain source, because - as Smith, Kames and Ferguson themselves explained - “similar stages of society will produce like manners among all mankind”. Basing their analysis on the pre-eminence of manners, the two main Scottish historians, William Robertson and David Hume, openly renounced scholarship on the most remote past. Pinkerton instead believed that “the truth is always at the bottom; and if a man does not know all upon an antiquarian subject, he knows nothing”. In Pinkerton’s eyes, Robertson and Hume were simply scratching the surface of history, without going beyond it. Wideside down, he thought that the Scottish literati read history upside down, and pointed to the retrograde path of Hume’s History of England as a clear example. Before applying himself to earlier periods in time, Hume started these volumes with the account of the house of Stewart, which led him to injure the English liberty. The methodological contrast, the inversion of the historical priorities, was thus a profoundly ideological contrast. “Conjectural history” and “philosophical history” basically tended to expunge the original differences between peoples. In Pinkerton’s view, “a species of men, capable of the utmost progress, that another affrights, well in its original state, be on a level with another people, incapable of any progress at all”. Stages perspective and polygenetic theory were linked in the concept that the “source”, the “root”, the “bottom” of the progress was blood. This is why “the knowledge of the ancient part is not only necessary in itself, but necessary to understand the modern. To a philosopher, the ancient part is the most interesting, from the strong and uncommon views of human nature to be found in it”. History indeed had to provide patriotism and on the different scope of antiquarianism, which could shed light on the different origins of peoples: “the geographical grammar” was to become the genealogical map of progress and civility, for Pinkerton. Since the beginning, his arguments were completely free of even the slightest hint of universalism.

11. Progress, in fact, could not be considered the patrimony of all humanity. It was not even the patrimony of the entire Europe: it pertained just to the Gothic-Scythian peoples. Progress revealed itself through history, and showed itself to be a history of “conquests”. The Scythians, emigrating from their native land, Persia, had “detached victorious colonies into the greater part of Europe”, founding all the “celebrated Scythian nations” - the whole succession of civil peoples in ancient and modern times - Greeks, Romans, Germans, English - were constituted by the descendents of the Scythians. By contrast, Celts were the aboriginal European peoples, who had not been colonized people. Europe, many centuries before the Christian era, had already seen what would happen in America after Columbus’ arrival: the Celts for Pinkerton were “to the other races what savages of America are to the European settlers there”. The Celts have been savages since the beginning of the world, “being incapable of any progress in society”; and they would be savages for as long as they remained a separate and pure people, that is of “unmixt blood”. Moreover, they were, among all the savage peoples, “the most degenerated in undeveloped indifference may be traced among the Samoieds, Laplanders, Negroes, etc., but among the Celts, none of native growth.” Not even the contact with the Scythians-Goths, which rendered the half of their blood gothic, was enough to civilize them. The Celtic race, thus, was the pariah of Europe by which Pinkerton could demonstrate that history always moved through the migrations of superior peoples. The history of progress was, in Pinkerton’s mind, a history of colonization, which began in Persia and was being advanced in America.

The historical and antiquarian enquiry on the ancient peoples was thus ready to structure the contemporary history of peoples in terms of “destinies” and “ vocations”. This is what Pinkerton did at the beginning of the nineteenth century in his Modern Geography, an accessible work in six unabridged and three abridged editions, recently described as “unusual in terms of its intellectual rigour”. The “modern geography” ranked the countries according to firm hierarchical criteria. Europe is united by the “humanitarian” task as the civilizing agent of the world. The other continents were judged on their relation with Europe and on their level of civilization. From this point of view, Asia had pre-eminence because it was the birthplace of both the “prodigious original population” of the Scythians and the most civilized ancient people, the Arabs. America, on the contrary, was the land of the most recent civilization and was divided in two radically distinct parts, corresponding to the characters of its colonizers. The United States, where the British spirit prevailed, stood very near to European greatness. South America was instead somewhat lower, dominated by superstition and fanaticism, typical features of the Portuguese and Spanish colonizers. Africa was last, being considered
The coexistence of hierarchy and universalism was the problem of the historical idea of the most useless and unknown of the continents, inhabited in its central and southern part by “Negroes”, a distinct race destined to be enslaved.

12. Pinkerton organised Europe itself into a firm hierarchy of “Principal States”, “Secondary States”, and “States of the Third Order”, determined by the confluence of the history of races and their present political power. The principal states included the great British empire at the forefront, followed by the rising stars of Prussia and Russia, and finally the declining Spanish and Ottoman empires. Portugal was classified as a secondary state, peopled, according to Pinkerton, by the “most stupid” and “ignorant” people in Europe, who, notwithstanding the advantage of an early discovery, failed in the colonization of Africa. In the third order, the geographical labyrinth of Italian and German States represented just possible fields of internal expansion. France represented a unique case because it denied the European vocation to civilization, following Rousseau in the “abominable” praise of the savage state. Though Pinkerton classified it among the principal states, France had reopened the gates to savagery in Europe with the sansculottes, and more generally in the world through its projects of slaves’ emancipation. The “wild theory of the rights of man”, which the “fanatic” National Assembly extended also to “Negroes”, caused ruins and convulsions in all the French colonies, Pinkerton reports. The Blacks’ rebellion in St. Domingo should remind us, as a warning to European legislators to study properly “the irradicable difference of character and dispositions in the various races of men, to which infinite wisdom has allotted distinct portions of the earth”. The risk, Pinkerton warns again, is that “the rights of horses may next be discussed”. The “very nature and existence of the negroes, and other savages” can bring only destruction and desolation because it is, to the eyes of the “modern geographer”, very similar to that of the beasts; suspicious, vindictive, remorseless, and without any value of peace, security and property. Therefore, the leading principle of the European power in the world has to be, for Pinkerton, the “reality” of the “different races”, and not the absurd abstraction of the universal rights of men. “The wrongs of Africa can only be terminated by a powerful European colony”: only the conquest makes civilization possible. For this reason, Pinkerton hoped that Africa would be conquered and civilized by capable Europeans, as America had been. Only in this way, Africa could reach its proper place in the hierarchy of civilizations. This was still excluded. Fifteen years after Pinkerton wrote his Dissertation, he completed his construction of world geographical hierarchy along the past and future lines of expansion of the Scythian race and culture. The Modern Geography traced the essential lines of the map where the imperial competition among European states would have to be played in the following centuries.

13. According to Pocock, applying the stages theory to the history of Europe brought the Scots to conclude that “the ‘progress of society’ and les progrès de l’esprit humain did not happen in the same way in all parts of the globe”. The European uniqueness is a consequence of European history, as it is constructed by Smith: as “aboriginally settled by shepherds”, “Europe” at its inception was barbarian, but not savage”, in contrast to the static American. Since the beginning, Europe is dynamic and has the roots of progress in itself, because it gives its origins a rathered state that of ranks and wealth have origins: for the Scottish literar the narrative of progress would have been only the narrative of European progress. This is, I suspect, Gibbon’s reading of the Scots, as Pocock reconstructs it. To my mind, if Smith, Ferguson and Robertson do not go further back in search of an European hunter-gatherer stage - a fact underlined by Pocock’s analysis - it is also because, in their view, writing history needs positive and verifiable sources. But, at the same time, these historians oppose a full stage theory as a framework. The narrative of progress was made possible through abstraction, which bridged the barbarism of Tacitean Germans to the savagery of Americans. I wish here to recall that for both Ferguson and Robertson, “there is nothing wonderful […] in the similitude between the Americans and the barbarous nations of our continent”. The historiography of the Scottish Enlightenment was, thus, based on universalistic assumptions.

Though Kames shared this approach with the other Scottish literar; nonetheless he started to doubt the validity of the comparison between “different humanities”; Pinkerton completely disagreed with this comparison. The first felt the need of a polygenetic argument to explain the differences in progress; while Pinkerton took it as his starting point. Actually, both Kames and Pinkerton turned the idea of progress into a racialist discourse, which was also a racialization of the European space. However, as we have seen, Kames and Pinkerton mirrored each other in their racial characterizations of British peoples. Kames bound the whole of Great Britain in their common bello-cowigans, while Pinkerton associated the highlands-Highlands differences to the distinct bloods of the civil Scythians and the savage Celts. While Kames stressed the preserved memory and tradition of bards on the Scottish mountains, Pinkerton was looking at the expansion of British culture in the world. Moreover, Kames’ racial speculation was constructed on the exceptions to the general trajectory of progress: the “native” Americans, who did not leave the savage state, and the Celts who, though a society of hunter, did not lose the characteristics of civilization. Affirmed in the context of the defence of Scottish literary dignity, Kames’ Nordic race was the result of a projection of an ideal equilibrium in the past, which contrasted with some of the feared negative consequences of the commercial society. It was, therefore, a notion of race which could hardly sustain aggressive expansion. The theory of the diverse creations fit for different climates, on which Kames based his polygenism, bound the progress of the races to their natural habitats, outside of which the different species of men tend to degenerate. On the contrary, Pinkerton’s sustaining factor of civilization, maintaining its progress under every sky, free from any environmental influence. While in the Sketches there was a clear tension between hierarchical and universalistic principles in the history of human progress, which still concedes a relativistic point of view, Pinkerton’s hierarchy was perfectly integrated into the universal and historical dimensions of progress. In the period between Kames’ Sketches of the History of Man and Pinkerton’s Modern Geography, the abolitionist campaign and the thinkers had challenged the traditional social categories, setting the pretext for the shift from the eighteenth-century racial discourses to the racist thought of the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries. Pinkerton’s polygenetic racism, based on the connection between blood and progress, already had the shape of a coherent imperialist ideology, which articulated world and European geography in terms of their proper destinies.
progress in the Enlightenment. When this tension was resolved by the prevalence of a hierarchical way of thinking, the Enlightened narrative of progress was simply and completely replaced by the narrative and perspective of imperialism. This was exactly what Pinkerton’s racism provided opposing the veracity of the genealogical and geographical antiquarianism to the “confusion” of the sociological approaches of the main Scottish historians. Thus, Kames’ superior races argued in contrast with the monogenetic faith of the most of the other Scottish literati in the “common prerogative of man”[50], remained a kind of literary dream about “civilized savages”. On the contrary, Pinkerton’s Scythians have the entire dimension of an incontrovertible historical truth. Pinkerton had no difficulty to discover a real savage state also in Europe: the narrative of imperialism needed spaces of conquests in the past as well as in the future. So Pinkerton severed all the links with the Mosaic Account, which Kames desperately tried to re-conciliate with his polygenetic assumptions: those who attempted to find information on the origins of men and nations from the Bible will be for Pinkerton “shockingly deceived”[51]. The distinction of races became stronger, but less visible. Indeed, the racialization of the European peoples brought Pinkerton to give up “common sense”, which was still central in the reflections of Kames. From thence, Voltaire’s extraterrestrial would have had more problems distinguishing a Celt from a Scythian, than he had before in identifying Blacks, Indians and Whites as members of different species. Celts and Scythians, though physically similar, were instead, in Pinkerton’s mind, as distant from each other as is black from white[52]. The enquiry into the “roots” of history led the Nineteenth century to surrender history to the sciences: from scientific progress only, wrote Pinkerton, “a complete system of the many different races of men”[53] would have been definitively provided.


[2] J. PINKERTON, “Advertisement”, in An Enquiry into the History of Scotland. Preceding the Reign of Malcolm III or the Year 1056. Including the Authentic History of that period, 2 vol., London, 1794, p. 5. In the same place, Pinkerton affirms that Gibbon deeply appreciated his Enquiry, speaking about this as “the only book which had given him authentic ideas concerning the early history of Scotland”.


Mayhew, between Guthrie’s Geographical, Historical and Commercial Grammar, Gentleman’s

History of England from the invasion of Julius Caesar to the revolution in 1688, Indianapolis,

European races vary a bit, because in the place of the Sermatae and Iberi there are the Finns in the north-east and the “diminutive race” of the Laplanders in the extreme north. However, the relation between Goths-Scythians and Celts does not change. See: J. Pinkerton, Modern Geography. A Description of the Empires, Kingdoms, States and Colonies; with the Oceans, Seas, and Isles; in all Parts of the World: Including the most recent Discoveries, and Political Alterations. Digested on a New Plan, 2 voll., London, 1802, vol. I, p. 8.

Pinkerton, Dissertation cit., p. 67.

Ibidem, p. 68.


Pinkerton, Dissertation cit., p. IV.

Ibidem, p. 131.


Every major theme in eighteenth-century political thought is covered in a series of essays at once scholarly and accessible, and the essays are complemented by extensive guides for further reading, and brief biographical notes of the major characters in the text, including Rousseau, Montesquieu and David Hume. Of interest and relevance to students and scholars of politics and history at all levels from beginning undergraduate upwards, this volume chronicles one of the most exciting and rewarding of all periods in the development of western thinking about politics, man (and increasingly woman).

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.13128/Cromohs-15686

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.