

CHAPTER FOUR

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*The History of Mankind*

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the history of liberty that Iselin developed in his *History of Mankind*. The *Philosophische Mutmassungen. Ueber die Geschichte der Menschheit*, as the full title of the first edition reads, was Iselin's most successful book.<sup>1</sup> It was widely hailed as a major contribution to the field of moral legislation and a new and highly promising approach to the joint study of history and metaphysics. A second, heavily revised edition, published by the famous Zurich publisher *Orell, Gessner & Comp.*, appeared in 1768, this time with the author's name featuring proudly on the front page followed by a simple, *On the History of Mankind*.<sup>2</sup> A third edition, basically a reprint of the second, followed in 1770. A fourth edition, again revised, appeared in 1779, this time with the Basel publisher Johannes Schweighauser. A fifth edition, reprinting the fourth, was published in 1784 with Schmieder in Karlsruhe; a sixth, again with Schweighauser, in 1786. A seventh and final edition, a reprint of the 1786 edition, was printed in 1791, once again in Basel, making the *History of Mankind* the single most

<sup>1</sup> Iselin divided the first edition into six books: "Psychologische Betrachtungen des Menschen"; "Von dem Stande der Natur"; "Von dem Stande der Wildheit"; "Von den Anfängen des gesitteten Standes und von desselben Schicksalen bey den orientalischen Völkern"; "Von den Fortgängen des gesitteten Standes bey den Griechen und bey den Römern"; "Von den Fortgängen des gesitteten Standes bey den heutigen europäischen Nationen."

<sup>2</sup> For the second edition, Iselin rearranged the material of Book Four of the first edition into three separate books: "Von den Anfängen des gesitteten Standes, bis zur Vestsetzung der häuslichen Gesellschaft"; "Von den Fortgängen der Geselligkeit zu dem bürgerlichen Stande"; "Von den Fortgängen des gesitteten Standes bey den orientalischen Völkern". The headings of the other books remained the same.

widely read book on political thought by any German Swiss writer of the eighteenth century.

While the first edition was met with relatively little response outside Switzerland, the second edition of 1768 had a major impact within German academic and literary circles and prompted a whole string of like-minded studies.<sup>3</sup> Iselin's work was soon used as a textbook for the teaching of the history of public law, the history of morality and of 'culture'. His critique of Rousseau in Book Two, "Of the State of Nature", was commonly regarded as the most thorough rebuttal so far and found its way into numerous moral philosophical treatises of the 1760s and 1770s. Iselin's influence was such, Herder complained in his *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1774), that it had become fashionable to write 'Histories of Mankind' in the style of Iselin.<sup>4</sup> We know that Christoph Martin Wieland, whilst Professor of Philosophy at the University of Erfurt, lectured on Iselin's *History of Mankind*.<sup>5</sup> It was also widely used in German Gymnasii for the teaching of the increasingly popular subject of 'Universal History'. Herder, although initially vastly critical of Iselin, later suggested that history courses on a Gymnasium level should follow the "Plan" laid out in Volume Two of the *History*.<sup>6</sup> In a letter to his friend Merkel dated 12 December 1799 he even proclaimed Iselin his immediate predecessor: "this is actually how we follow one another: Iselin, myself and Kant. [...] This is how we stand in world history."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Im Hof, *Isaak Iselin und die Spätaufklärung*, p. 77-100.

<sup>4</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*, Stuttgart 1990, p. 55, note m.

<sup>5</sup> Christoph Martin Wieland, *Ausgewählte Briefe*, Zürich 1815, vol. 2, p. 311.

<sup>6</sup> "Der zweite Band von Iselins 'Geschichte der Menschheit' hat den Plan. Wenn ihn ein Lehrer für sich studierte und so dann mit dem Licht und Reichtum der Geschichte, sofern sie für Knaben gehört, ausfüllet, so müsste nichts Schöneres und Lehrreicherer als die Geschichte existieren." Cited in Alfred Stern, 'Über Isaak Iselins Geschichte der Menschheit', in *Zeitschrift für schweizerische Geschichte*, 10, 1930, p. 238.

<sup>7</sup> K.A. Böttiger (ed.), *Literaturzustände und Zeitgenossen in Schilderungen aus Karl August Böttigers handschriftlichem Nachlass*, vol. 1, Leipzig 1838, p. 130. Although Kant does not mention Iselin's book in any of his published works, it is fair to assume that he was well acquainted with its content. There are some strong similarities between the *History of Mankind* and some of Kant's shorter essays on

While the *History of Mankind* was generally considered a breakthrough within the field of philosophical history, Iselin's work also met some stiff opposition.<sup>8</sup> It is easy to see why. For one, the *History of Mankind* is not what one would commonly call a good read. It lacked the stylistic qualities and narrative structure of some of the subsequent and more famous histories, like Adam Ferguson's *History of Civil Society*, Lord Kames' *Sketches on the history of man* or Christoph Meiners' *Grundriss der Geschichte der Menschheit*.<sup>9</sup> Some reviewers complained that the *History of Mankind* was too philosophical and that the alleged historical evidence which he

history, notably his *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* of 1784, the *Conjectural Beginnings of Human History* of 1786 and the *An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?* of 1798. The similarity between Iselin's and Kant's ideas on history and teleology – for example, their view that the development of the individual from a state of pure sensuousness to a state of passions and imagination to, finally, a state of reason provided the matrix for the development of the entire species – was noticed fairly early on. It was also noticed by a number of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German intellectual historians, although they usually dismissed any suggestion that a figure like Kant could have owed some of his ideas to the work of a comparatively minor writer like Iselin. See for example Alfred Stern, "Über Isaak Iselins Geschichte der Menschheit", p. 241f. For a more complete list, see Ulrich Im Hof, *Isaak Iselin und die Spätaufklärung*, Bern und München 1967, p. 91ff and p. 265-267. For a good account of Kant's historical philosophy, see Michel Despland, *Kant on History and Religion – with a translation of Kant's "On the failure of all attempted philosophical theodicies"*, Montreal and London 1973.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the most hostile reactions seem to have come from Zurich. Bondeli claimed that Bodmer even intended to write a reply to Iselin's *History*. See her letter to Zimmermann (19 May 1764) where she reports that "Bodmer et personne de Z.[urich] excepté Mr. Hirzel n'approuve ce livre à ce qu'on m'écrit, et Bodmer veut m'envoyer (Dieu sçait pourquoi) un manuscrit sur la même matière". Cited in E. Bodemann, *Julie Bondeli*, p. 288. In a previous letter to Zimmermann (8 May 1764), Bondeli argued that Iselin's account of the state of nature was to a considerable extent derived from Smith's *Theory of moral sentiments*. See *ibid.*, p. 285. See also Im Hof, *Isaak Iselin und die Spätaufklärung*, p. 91f.

<sup>9</sup> For an attempt to categorise the various competing *histories of mankind* from the second half of the eighteenth-century, see Bertrand Binoche, *Les trois sources des philosophies de l'histoire (1764-1798)*, Paris 1994; also, Jörn Garber, "Zum geschichtlichen Kulturbegriff der deutschen Spätaufklärung", in *Spätabsolutismus und bürgerliche Gesellschaft. Studien zur deutschen Staats- und Gesellschaftstheorie im Übergang zur Moderne*, Frankfurt a. M. 1992, p. 409-433.

presented was too thin as to properly support the claims he was trying to make.<sup>10</sup> More significantly, several critics argued that, by placing so much weight on natural sociability and by trying to distance himself as much as possible from Rousseau, he had moved too far into the other direction. As a result, his earlier commitment to the ideal of republicanism had now become virtually invisible. Rather than explaining how the Swiss and other existing republics could survive in the midst of commercial Europe, Iselin, it was argued, had become a spokesman for commerce and minimal government. In his *Auch eine Philosophie zur Bildung der Geschichte der Menschheit* of 1774 Herder caricatured Iselin as a eulogist of modern civilisation who wanted to make his readers believe that mankind had already reached its final destination.<sup>11</sup> Iselin's *History of Mankind*, Herder argued, was overly optimistic in its assessment of society's capacity for self-regulation. Rather than having developed a new theory of politics and shown how the requirement for individual freedom could be harmonised with the requirements modern states Iselin, it was repeatedly argued, had reduced politics to the study of society.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> A moderate form of this criticism was also expressed by Fellenberg in a letter to Iselin of 3 April 1764: "J'ai lu d'abord après votre départ l'excellent ouvrage dont vous nous avez regalé. Il donne à mon avis des vues nouvelles sur la manière de traiter la morale et l'histoire. Je regarde cet ouvrage comme des Elemens Philosophiques de l'histoire. Ces elemens ou ces principes sont peut être encore trop généraux, et ils ne pourront [sic] encore mieux déterminé que lorsque les corps de nos observations historiques sera [sic] plus complet. En attendant il faudra donner beaucoup à la conjecture dans les recherches de cette espace." Berner Burgerbibliothek, Fellenberg-Archiv, Schachtel 152.

<sup>11</sup> J. G. Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie*, p. 49: "[J]eder klassische Schöndenker, der die Polizierung unsers Jahrhunderts fürs non plus ultra der Menschheit hält, hat Gelegenheit, [...] über das Licht unsers Jahrhunderts, das ist, über seinen Leichtsinn und Ausgelassenheit, über seine Wärme in Ideen und Kälte in Handlungen, über seine scheinbare Stärke und Freiheit, und über sein wirkliche Todesschwäche und Ermattung unter Unglauben, Despotismus und Üppigkeit zu lobjauchzen. Davon sind alle Bücher unserer Voltaire und Hume, Robertsons und Iselins voll."

<sup>12</sup> In a letter to Zimmermann (18 May 1764), Wieland ridiculed Iselin as a well-meaning but essentially naïve Christian who wrote for "boys and women". *Ausgewählte Briefe von C. M. Wieland*, vol. 2, Zürich 1815, p. 237. Cited in Im Hof, *Isaak Iselin und die Spätaufklärung*, p. 295, note 2.

This was also the view of the German reformer and Iselin's friend, Johann Georg Schlosser. In a letter to Iselin, dated 24 August 1776, he accused him of having replaced Rousseau's scepticism with naïve idealism: "You are right, Rousseau got lost! He debases man to a mere animal existence; the path of nature which he describes is a path in the dust; but yours, Iselin, is it not a path which leads above the clouds?"<sup>13</sup> Iselin's claim that the spread of commerce would lead to the realisation of 'humanity' simply didn't add up. The idea that the dynamics unleashed by the continuous multiplication of artificial needs would lead to the establishment of an ordered society where men could fulfil their moral potential was no less paradoxical than the arguments put forward by Rousseau. While it was true, Schlosser admitted, that without commerce "we would never care about two thirds of [the population of] this world" and that commerce, in this sense, could be seen as promoter of 'humanity', it remained highly questionable whether the spread of 'humanity' had in any way been morally beneficial to those people who had known nothing but simple needs and who, for these reasons, "had been much happier without us."<sup>14</sup> Once men strayed from nature's path of virtu-

<sup>13</sup> Iselin published Schlosser's letters as well as his own replies in the *Ephemeriden der Menschheit*, 1776, neuntes Stück, p. 1-22, under the title: 'Ueber die Träume eines Menschen=Freundes'. See p. 4: "Sie haben Recht, Rousseau hat sich verirrt! Er erniedert den Menschen zum Thier; der Gang der Natur, den er zeichnet ist Gang im Staub, aber Ihrer, Iselin, ist nicht Gang über den Wolken?" On Schlosser, see Alfred Nicolovius, *Johann Georg Schlossers Leben und literarisches Wirken*, Bern 1973; Johan van der Zande, *Bürger und Beamter. Johann Georg Schlosser 1739-1799*, Stuttgart 1986 and, more recently, Friedrich Vollhardt, "Selbstreflexive Aufklärung: Johann Georg Schlosser in den literarischen Kontroversen des späten 18. Jahrhunderts", in Achim Aurnhammer and Wilhelm Kühlmann (eds.), *Zwischen Josephinismus und Frühliberalismus: literarisches Leben in Südbaden um 1800*, Freiburg im Breisgau 2002, p. 367-394. On Schlosser's relationship to the *Helvetische Gesellschaft*, see Carsten Behle, "Ich will Euch jetzt nicht betrüben mit meinen Nachrichten aus der Welt": Johann Georg Schlosser und die Helvetische Gesellschaft", in *ibid.* p. 395-411.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11: "Warum wollen sie auf der einen Seite dem Gang der Natur folgen, und auf der andern sich so weit von ihr entfernen, ihn auf dem schlüpferigen Gang der Weichlichkeit, der Leckerhaftigkeit, der Eitelkeit und des ganzen Gefolgs der Ueppigkeit und Thorheit suchen? Ich gebe ihnen zu, ohne diese würden wir uns um 2/3 der Welt gar nicht kümmern, aber wiegt die Ausdehnung der Menschheit auf die übrige Welt, die viel glücklicher war ohne uns, wiegt sie den Schaden auf, den wir durch diese Vermehrung der Bedürfnisse leiden?"

ous simplicity and entered commercial society there was no turning back. Reconciliation with nature was no longer possible – neither through a forced return to abstinence and simplicity, nor by means of civilisation, religion, art or reason. Modern men, Schlosser insisted, had lost any capacity to “live according to the precepts of nature.”<sup>15</sup> Commerce and civilisation might make men more aware of the suffering of other, distant people, but it could not “bring men closer to one another”, change their behaviour, let alone realise the brotherhood of mankind.<sup>16</sup> If Rousseau’s claim that a lawful order could be realised only through pure politics was the expression of a pathologically enhanced pessimism, Iselin’s view which saw the establishment of a lawful order as the outcome of wide-spread of commerce, on the other hand, seemed to be founded on an almost reckless optimism.<sup>17</sup>

But, perhaps the most insightful comments were made by Julie Bondeli, shortly after the publication of the *History of Mankind*.<sup>18</sup> Like Schlosser and Mendelssohn, Bondeli admitted that in Book Two Iselin had provided the “most solid” refutation of Rousseau’s critique of sociability so far.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, she insisted that Iselin’s own positive solution remained unsatisfactory because it did not properly answer the questions Rousseau had first put forward in his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* and which he had been asking ever since: namely whether it was possible to reconcile the idea of human freedom, the idea that man was a moral agent free to chose

<sup>15</sup> ‘Ueber die Träume eines Menschen=Freundes’, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> In his laudatio, presented at the *Helvetische Gesellschaft* in 1783, Schlosser gave a more moderate account of the differences between Rousseau and Iselin. Iselin did recognise the moral failings of man, “er verwies ihn deswegen nicht zu den Hölen des Einsiedlers, nicht zu den Ufern des Ganges, nicht zu den fabelhaften Severamben; mitten auf der Rennbahn nach Reichthum, nach Ehre, nach Wollust, worauf wir laufen, wollte er uns halten, und nur durch eine kleine Umlenkung, uns führen zum Ziel der wahren, auch Menschenehre, der wahren, auch Menschenwollust, des wahren, auch Erde=Reichthums.” See, “Rede auf Isaak Iselin gehalten am 4ten Juni 1783 in der Helvetischen Gesellschaft zu Olten”, in *Deutsches Museum*, 1783, vol. 2, p. 426-27.

<sup>18</sup> See especially Bondeli’s letters to Zimmermann from 8 and 19 May 1764; reprinted in E. Bodemann, *Julie Bondeli*, p. 284-290.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284: “Mr. Iselin est de tous ceux, qui ont refuté Rousseau celui qui s’en est acquité le plus solidement.”

his own ends, with the idea of an intelligent cause orienting the development of the human race. According to Bondeli, the very purpose of Rousseau’s critique of sociability was to undermine any argument which sought to vindicate society as a vehicle for the establishment of freedom. “Rousseau says that all evil comes from society; who of us fails to notice that this is true? These evils are the result of the clash between different interests”. The larger a society, the greater the conflict of interests;

everyone knows that it is easier to live with just one person than with ten. If Rousseau thinks that society is arbitrary he might be mistaken; but if he wanted to talk merely about the sum of evil that the individual encounters in society, why answer him by listing the sum of advantages that the society [*agrégation*] as a whole gains from it?<sup>20</sup>

Civilisation, commerce, the arts and sciences, Bondeli admitted, were advantageous to society as a whole, yet they remained harmful to the individual. Hence, “Rousseau is right in his way, just as Iselin is right in his; but they are both mistaken if they want to deduce general principles from their particular propositions.”<sup>21</sup> By focusing exclusively on what was useful to society Iselin, Bondeli claimed, had not paid enough attention the issue of human freedom. If Iselin had really wanted to present a positive alternative to Rousseau, rather than to just dismantle his critique of natural sociability, he would have had to show how Rousseau’s ideal of freedom could be realised by means other than the *Social Contract*.

In this chapter I would like to suggest that this was precisely what Iselin tried to achieve in the *History of Mankind*. In the following sections I want to show that Iselin’s work was more than a theory of society: it contained a clear vision of human liberty which tried to directly address the problems

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284-285: “Si Rousseau croit que l’état de société était arbitraire, il peut avoir tort, mais s’il n’a voulu parler que de la somme des maux, que l’individu trouve dans la société, pourquoi lui répond-on par la somme des biens qu’y trouve l’agrégation. Dire que l’agrégation n’est que le produit des individus, c’est dire vrai, quand il est question de chiffres, de companies, battalions et régimens, mais les êtres moraux, les sommes de leurs biens et de leurs maux ne se calculent pas ainsi.”

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285: “Rousseau a donc raison dans son point de vue, Iselin dans le sien, mais tous les deux ont tort, quand ils concluent de leurs propositions particulières au général.”

Rousseau had raised. I shall thereby limit my account to two particular aspects of Iselin's political theory in the *History of Mankind*. The first is Iselin's attempt to prove that nature's plan for man is to make him a self-governing being. Once this could be shown, Iselin believed, Rousseau's *Social Contract* became obsolete. Human freedom did not require a union of wills. Men were gradually being nudged by nature towards a state of true freedom where the natural liberty of the individual did not clash with the needs of the community. Although he admitted that modern men had not yet reached the state of real freedom, they had nevertheless reached a level of consciousness which permitted them to fully understand the natural purpose of man and gradually to become masters of their own fate.

The second aspect I wish to discuss is Iselin's model for explaining nature's secret working towards the realisation of freedom. Here, Iselin's main target was not so much Rousseau but Montesquieu's history of liberty in the *Esprit des Lois* which Iselin criticised for being overly deterministic and incompatible with the idea of self-determination. Nature, Iselin claimed, realised freedom through the interaction of two different types of societies – societies that had formed on the basis of sociability and those that had formed on the basis on unsociability. True freedom, Iselin argued, could only be realised once these two forms of societies fused into a single entity.

## 2. *From Contrat Social to Ordre Social*

There was some confusion amongst contemporary readers of the *History of Mankind* about the precise shape of Iselin's idea of the state. In a letter to Zimmermann, dated 19 May 1764, Bondeli, for example, claimed that Iselin's ideal polity had been the pastoral despotism of the agrarian kingdoms in the East:

His hobby-horse is [...] very visible in his Book on "Despotic Government"; as I understand it, he would like to have the despotism of the ancient people of the orient, "a pastoral government", and in this sense he might have a point if only such [a government] was possible in this age of Enlightenment – however, this is where the contradiction lies.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287-288: "Son hobby-horse est aussi très sensible dans son livre "Le gou-

Bondeli's view of Iselin as an advocate of ancient Oriental despotism, although it is clearly false, is nevertheless highly interesting in that it helps us to see both the affinity and difference of Iselin's political theory to that of Rousseau.<sup>23</sup>

In Book Six, Iselin praised the ancient despotic states as a model of unity and peace where "the particular wills [of the citizens] were subjected to the general will" of the sovereign.<sup>24</sup> According to Iselin, ancient despotism presented an early form of lawful order based on consent. (The element of fear was introduced only once the despot had become corrupt.) Originally, it was founded on nothing but the love and gratitude of a simple, naturally sociable, agrarian people for their more talented and more enlightened benefactor who fed them with new general ideas which their minds had so far been unable to produce. Because the despot was the only one capable of providing them with explanations about the external world he effectively acquired the position of God, thereby lending the expressions of his particular will the status of divine laws. Ancient despotism, hence, could not be reduced simply to personal rule. It was both personal and general at the same time. Because the needs of the people were both simple and, due to a fertile climate, could be satisfied easily, despotic rule, Iselin suggested, was also mild and non-interventionist. Men behaved peacefully towards one another, though they did not have any perception of a 'love of fatherland' that went beyond love for the person of the sovereign. As a result, men existed as a people only through the state. Any clash between society and the state which might have perturbed the tranquillity of ancient despotism

vernement despotique", mais à présent je le comprends, il voudrait le despotisme des anciens peuples orientaux, "eine hirtenmässige Regierungsform", et dans ce sens-là il pourrait bien ne pas avoir tort, si la chose était possible dans ce siècle de lumières, mais voilà où git la contradiction." Bondeli, in the same letter, suggests that Iselin's apparent infatuation with despotic government was largely due to his reading of Mably's *Phocion*. See, p. 287: "J'ai lu depuis ma dernière lettre les "Entretiens de Phocion". Cela est bien bon et Mr. Iselin a bien eu raison d'en profiter".

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed account of the various stages of Iselin's history of humanity, see the recent, very insightful study by Andreas Urs Sommer, *Geschichte als Trost. Isaak Iselins Geschichtsphilosophie*, Basel 2002.

<sup>24</sup> *Über die Geschichte der Menschheit*, Zürich 1770, vol. 2, p. 85.

was thus inconceivable. As Iselin portrayed it, ancient despotism presented a harmonious and uniform order:

Everything corresponded with one another; the most simple driving wheels were enough to give it a purposeful and regular movement and to animate this enormous machine through [only a few and] most simple orders.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to what Bondeli seemed to believe, Iselin had not the slightest wish to see the re-establishment of ancient despotism in the midst of modern Europe. He gave two reasons for this. The first was that despotism had been able to develop only under very specific conditions and only at a particular juncture within the development of the human race. It was based on primitive agrarianism and intellectual innocence. The complete unity of wills in Oriental despotism was possible

because the *particular reason* of each individual citizen was so little developed; because it had not been contaminated with any false ideas nor strengthened by true insights; the *common reason of the state*, meaning the law, found little opposition. Moreover, because the *particular will* of each citizen was so soft and so malleable; because it was governed by only a few intentions; the *general will*, the will of the prince was met with very little resistance.<sup>26</sup>

As history showed, Oriental despotism was also ultimately unstable. Because the only foundation of the body politic was the personal tie of the citizen to the sovereign despot himself, the old despotic states lasted only as long as the despot himself was benevolent and maintained the monopoly on interpreting the external world. Once the despot died or was replaced with someone of lesser merit – or once that the self-sufficient economy was upset by invading hordes – the early agrarian kingdoms either disintegrated or changed from a despotism based on love to one driven by fear.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 86: “Alles stimmte überein, durch die einfachsten Triebräder eine zweckmässige und gleichförmige Bewegung zu erzielen, und eine ungeheure Maschine durch eine sehr einfältige Ordnung zu beseelen.”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 88-89: “Da die *besondere Vernunft* eines jeden Bürgers so wenig angebaut; da sie weder durch falsche Meinungen verdorben noch durch wahre Einsichten gestärket war; so fand die *allgemeine Vernunft* des Staates, das Gesetz, darin wenig Widerstand. Da der *besondere Wille* eines jeden Bürgers so weich und so beugsam war; da er durch so wenige Absichten beherrschet wurde; so fand der *allgemeine Wille*, der Befehl der Fürsten, darinn so wenig Widersetzlichkeit.”

The second, and more important reason why Iselin rejected any attempt to revive Oriental despotism was that it was morally undesirable. Although the authority of the despot was based on consent, Iselin insisted that its legitimacy was of only a limited kind. The citizens' mental faculties and, hence, their wills had not been developed sufficiently for them to be fully conscious of their act. More importantly, Oriental despotism was undesirable because its policy was to lock the human mind into an eternal state of infant-like simplicity, thereby preventing man from realising his talents and becoming a self-governing being.

What Iselin wanted was a form of politics that combined complete subjection (to the laws) with human flourishing. Oriental despotism had achieved merely the first; moreover, it had done so at the cost of the latter which, Iselin argued in Book One, was “the unconstrained development of the activity of the soul.”<sup>27</sup> Man, it followed, could claim to have reached a state of true freedom only once he had realised his natural faculties.

True freedom derives from such an activity of the soul which truly elevates the greatness and perfection of the mind and which spreads its advantageous results to all aspects of our existence and our life. Man can pride himself of true freedom only once he has overcome the obstacles which prevent him from fulfilling his noble destiny.<sup>28</sup>

Although the rule of law was central to good politics, it was not the only criterion that determined whether or not citizens were in a state of true freedom. History showed that men could live under the rule of law, and even love the laws, without being truly free. Oriental despotism was one example, Sparta another. In Sparta,

There reigned complete despotism; but a despotism of the laws and not of men; hard for those who had not been reared for it; but easy for those who, from childhood onwards, had never seen nor felt anything else.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 124: “Die Grundlage davon besteht in einem ungehemmten Fortgange der Wirksamkeit der Seele.”

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 125: “Die wahre Freyheit hingegen entsteht aus einer solchen Tätigkeit der Seele, welche die Grösse und die Vollkommenheit des Geistes wahrhaftig erhöht, und welche die glückseligen Folgen davon unsers Lebens ausbreitet. Nur in so fern kann sich ein Mensch einer wahren Freyheit rühmen, in so fern er die Hindernisse bekämpft hat, welche ihn von der Erfüllung seiner grossen Bestimmung abführen.”

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, p. 169: “Es herrschte da ein vollkommener Despotismus; aber ein

Sparta, Iselin claimed, would have been the perfect state, if the highest form of freedom men were able to achieve was determined exclusively by the absence of personal rule. By subjecting all citizens to a regime of strict equality and communal education and by forcing them to abandon any activity that might drive a wedge between the citizens and the state, Lycurgus had managed to engrave the laws into the hearts of the citizens.<sup>30</sup> This, Iselin admitted, was no small accomplishment. However, Lycurgus was able to establish and maintain the rule of law only by closing “all openings through which the desire for change could have crept into the hearts” of the citizens. In so doing, he placed the Spartans “into a state that was almost contrary to nature”.<sup>31</sup>

If man was by nature a wild beast; one could not but credit the founder of the Spartan Constitution with having brought legislation to perfection. But man should not just be tamed, he should be made better; he should be made good, not through external constraint but through the inner mildness of his soul.<sup>32</sup>

As he pointed out, both Spartans and those living under Oriental despots had loved the laws. The Spartans did so because the law had become custom and therefore engrained in their very existence; those living under Oriental despotism, because the the despotic laws were benevolent, mild and had taken the form of divine laws. In both cases, however, the ‘love of the laws’

Despotismus der Gesetze und nicht der Menschen; hart für den, der nicht dazu erzogen war; aber leicht für den, der von Kindheit an nichts anders gesehen und empfunden hatte.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 167-168: “Alle genossen den gleichen Unterricht, die gleiche Erziehung, und die gleiche schwarze Suppe. Diese unterhielten bey allen die gleiche Anlage des Leibes, den gleichen Lauf der Säfter, und eine beynah vollkommene Gleichheit der Fähigkeiten, der Begierden, der Gemüthsart. Es war jedem Spartaner verboten, mehr zu denken, mehr zu wissen, mehr zu verlangen, mehr zu geniessen, als den übrigen. Ihre Geister waren alle gleich eingeschränket; sie durften sich mit nichts als mit ihren Waffen beschäftigen.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 168: “Die Lacedämonier waren also durch die Klugheit ihres Gesetzgebers in einen fast widernatürlichen Zustand versetzt.”

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 170: “Wenn der Mensch von Natur ein wildes Their wäre; so könnte man dem Stifter der spartanischen Verfassung die Ehre nicht absprechen, die Gesetzgebung auf den höchsten Gipfel gebracht zu haben. Aber der Mensch soll nichts gebändigt, er soll gebessert; er soll nicht durch einen äusserlichen Zwang, er soll durch die innerliche Milde seiner Seele gut werden.”

was founded more on ignorance and superstition, rather than on understanding, as would be the case in a polity based on human flourishing. Iselin was firmly convinced that man was destined to live in a state of freedom that was higher than the one constituted by either Lycurgus or the Oriental despots. Nature intended humans to love the laws not just because the latter were an expression of their will but also because they were rational. The fact, as Iselin had explained in Book One, that man could be seen to have a free will, only in so far he was a rational being, suggested that real freedom was only possible once humanity had reached the stage of adulthood and started to live under the guidance of reason.

Although in the *History of Mankind* Iselin did not mention the *Contrat Social*, there can be little doubt that he had Rousseau in mind when assessing the achievements and shortcomings of both Oriental despotism and Sparta for the establishment of liberty. One of the central aims of the *History of Mankind*, with regard to Rousseau, was to prove that the establishment of a lawful order did not require the unions of wills as Rousseau had argued in both the second *Discourse* and the *Social Contract*. It was nature’s plan that man should become a self-governing being. What the *History of Mankind* showed was that if man was allowed to freely develop his natural faculties there was good reason to believe that he would ultimately become a rational creature and live in societies that were governed only by laws, not men.

A reviewer of Iselin’s *Versuch über die gesellige Ordnung* (1772) – where he had summarised many of his arguments of the *History of Mankind* – described Iselin’s intellectual project as an attempt to replace the *Contrat Social* with an *Ordre Social*. Their idea of freedom was the same; the only difference between the two was that one claimed that liberty could be realised only through a deliberate act of collective human will, while the other wanted to show that there was an underlying order which nature had wanted to realise.<sup>33</sup>

Iselin confirmed this interpretation of the *History* in his review of Haller’s *Fabius und Cato* where he defended Rousseau’s *Social Contract*. Whilst agreeing with Haller that Rousseau’s political theory lent itself to the worst

<sup>33</sup> *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 1773, p. 430: “Demnach ist demnach kein *Contrat Social* sondern *Ordre social*, die nicht die Menschen sondern Gott und die Natur zum Urheber haben.”



kind of democratic politics, he claimed that “we cannot simply dismiss the theory of the *Social Contract* as a pure chimera.” Even if there existed no historical document to prove that men had ever formally agreed to enter into a compact with one another, it could not be denied that

wherever men live next to one another a natural instinct unites them together. [...] No less certain is the fact that whenever men agree to subject to another man’s authority it is done only under the condition that the ruler employs the forces of his subjects for the preservation and the increase of the common well-being and that he should govern according to the principles of justice which is the soul of any association. This we can call the *Social Contract*. – *Established by nature it is much more praiseworthy than if it had been established by men. This is the law which authority – although it does not create it – confirms and legalises.* Rulers and citizens who violate this law are punishable; and if an entire people, either by itself or by its designated representatives, wanted to unanimously revoke this contract, nothing substantial could be said against it.<sup>34</sup>

Nor, Iselin continued, was Rousseau’s idea of natural equality in any way chimerical. Natural inequality in talents, he agreed with Rousseau, should never translate into political or legal inequality. Iselin thus firmly rejected Haller’s defence of hereditary aristocracy. “By entering society no [man]

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 1775, p. 421-422: “Allein wir können doch die Lehre von dem geselligen Verträge nicht als seine blossе Chimäre ansehen. Wenn schon kein ausdrückliches Denkmal vorhanden ist, dass Menschen einander gesagt haben: wir wollen uns in eine bürgerliche Gesellschaft vereinigen; wir wollen uns Vorsteher erwählen, die sich verpflichten uns väterlich zu beherrschen: so ist doch gewiss, dass wo Menschen beysammen leben, ein natürlicher Trieb sie mit einander vereinige [...]. Nicht weniger ist es auch gewiss, dass, wo Menschen andern Menschen ein Ansehen über sich zugestehen, dieses nicht anders, als unter der Bedingnis geschehen könne, dass der Herrschende die Kräfte seiner Untergebenen zur Erhaltung und zur Vermehrung der gemeinschaftlichen Glückseligkeit gebrauche, und dass er in dem Gebrauche dieses Rechtes sich nach dem Grundsatz der Gerechtigkeit richte, welcher die Seele jeder geselligen vereinigung ist.\* [\* Contract social. L. I. Ch. 6] – *Von der Natur gestiftet ist er verehrungswürdiger, als wenn ihn Menschen errichtet hätten. Dieses ist das Gesetz, welches die Gewalt \*\* [\* l’autorité] zwar nicht erzeugt, aber doch bestätigt und sie rechtmässiger machet \*\*\* [\*\*\* Contract social. L. IV. Ch. 17.]* Beherrscher und Bürger, welche wider diesen Vertrag und dieses Gesetz sich verfehlen, sind sträflich; und wenn ein ganzes Volk durch sich selbst oder durch seine dazu bevollmächtigten Repräsentanten einmüthig diese Verbindungen aufheben wollten, so würde nichts gründliches dagegen einzuwenden seyn.” My italics.

sacrifices even the smallest part of his natural rights.”<sup>35</sup> Men remained as free as in the state of nature. Where Rousseau had gone wrong was to assume that a state which granted each individual the enjoyment of his natural freedom could come about only through his *Social Contract*. Iselin fully realised that Rousseau was not hostile to human flourishing *per se* but that he wanted to firmly separate the notion of human flourishing from the concept of legality. What he was worried about was the kind of politics needed for this union of wills to be stabilised. Iselin feared that human flourishing would be the prime victim, just as it had been under Lycurgus and Oriental despotism.

The *History of Mankind* provided an alternative scenario. According to Iselin, the order which nature wished to make real guaranteed both freedom and human flourishing. Moreover, because this lawful order in which nature intended man to live was brought about not through a union of wills which set one state against another but through the triumph of reason, individual freedom would be greater and more secure than it could ever be in Rousseau’s artificial state. Iselin believed that the more men advanced on their path to self-fulfilment and enlightenment, the more difficult it would be for ministers and princes to justify wars with reference to the ideal of common good.

It will be difficult to show that war can be waged without at the same time violating the human rights [*Rechte der Menschheit*] of countless innocent men. If we apply strict moral principles, are we allowed to commit an act of injustice to even the lowest of human being in order to defend our right against a third person? War will thus always remain an act of barbarism. [...] If ever reasonable and cleansed principles should gain the upper hand in the privy chambers of kings and princes – to which they are entitled, due to their dignity and truth – wars must become impossible.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 423: “Die natürliche Ungleichheit der Seelenvermögen und der Leibestärke unterwirft nicht den Unweisen dem Weisen, noch den Schwachen dem Stärkeren. [...] Durch den Eintritt in die Gesellschaft opfert keiner das Geringste seiner natürlichen Rechte auf. Jeder versichert sich einen grössern Genuss und eine minder kostbare Erhaltung derselben.”

<sup>36</sup> *Über die Geschichte der Menschheit*, vol. 2, p. 414: “Man wird kaum zeigen können, dass ein Krieg möglich sey, wo nicht an unzähligen Unschuldigen die Rechte der Menschheit verletzt werden müssen. Dürfen wir aber nach einer strengen Sittenlehre einem auch dem geringsten Menschen Unrecht thun, um uns gegen einem dritten Recht zu verschaffen? Immer wird also der Krieg eine barbarische Sache bleiben. Immer wird der ein Ungeheuer seyn, der ohne die äusserste Noth solchen

Iselin also believed that the European nations still had a long way to go until they reached a stage where respect for individual freedom became the founding principle of politics. Even if princes and ministers should experience a sudden change of heart and decide to become moral legislators, modern states could not attain a stage of real freedom over night. Nor could the *History of Mankind* provide a blueprint for how the transition from what he considered to be the existing state of late barbarism to the state of adulthood and reason should be organised. What Iselin believed his work could provide, though, was the proof, not just that men were meant to attain a state of real freedom – and that this state of freedom could be achieved without legislators having to opt for the Rousseauian model of a union of wills – but also that states which actively encouraged human flourishing would be more stable and wealthy.

### 3. Nature and self-determination

The first problem which, Iselin claimed, had to be solved if ministers were to be won over to the cause of moral legislation was the problem Rousseau had raised in the second *Discourse*: how could nature work towards freedom? Either one accepted that freedom was independent of the mechanical necessity of nature – in which case it simply didn't make sense to speak of a plan of nature working towards freedom – or, one could accept the view that the development of the human species was part of nature's plan – in which case it was very difficult to see how there could be any freedom at all. If society, civilisation, morality and the establishment of authority were the product of nature, it followed that man could never be the master of his own fate.

This was precisely what Rousseau had argued in the second *Discourse*. The critique of sociability, as Iselin fully realised, was meant to deliver a decisive blow to any attempt of trying to couch political arguments on arguments about the alleged purpose of human nature. Nature's plan for

anfängt, oder der einen andern dazu nöthiget. Wenn jemals vernünftige und geläuterte Grundsätze in den Cabinetern der Könige und der Fürsten die Uebermacht erhalten können, die ihnen durch die Würde und die Wahrheit gehöret; so müssen die Kriege unmöglich werden."

the human race, as Rousseau showed in Part One of the *Discourse*, went no further than to make man capable of surviving the dangers of life in the jungle. Any further development of man's faculties was set off by accident, as it were; an earthquake or some other kind of natural disaster which forced men to share a confined space over a prolonged period of time. Thus, neither society nor the establishment of a lawful order could be attributed to nature. As a consequence, there was nothing natural about Rousseau's state; it was pure artifice, even anti-natural. The state was the result of a pure act of collective human will which took the form of a *Social Contract*. According to Rousseau, it was precisely the conflation of political principles with ideas about a purposeful human nature which gave rise to permanent social and political instability because it allowed both rulers and ruled to appeal to positive ideals beyond the commonly defined (negative) purpose of the artificial state.

The first leg of Iselin's reply, as we saw in the previous chapter, was the refutation of Rousseau's critique of sociability. But dismantling Rousseau's attempt to derive justice from pity and re-establishing the notion of sociability on the idea of general sympathy, as Bondeli rightly saw, could not be the solution itself. It merely cleared away some of Rousseau's objections. The real solution, Iselin suggested in the *History of Mankind*, consisted in showing two things: first, that nature *did* have a purpose and, second, that its purpose was to make man a self-governing being.

#### 3.1. Nature's plan for man is only accomplished in the entire species

The problem, as far the first argument was concerned, was that unless one accepted Rousseau's account of natural man the purpose of human existence could not be detected in a single individual. Man, Iselin maintained, was "capable of the most noble greatness as well as of the most base excess, he soon raises to the sphere of the higher spirits only to sink almost below the state of some of the most despicable common beasts."<sup>37</sup> Unlike animals, in

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19: "[D]er erhabensten Grösse wie der niedrigsten Ausschweifungen fähig, schwinget sich derselbe bald zu der Sphäre der höhern Geister empor, indem er bald wieder fast unter die verächtlichsten Thiere hinuntersinket."

which nature's plan could be detected in every adult, human beings seemed to defy the laws of nature. There was nothing uniform about them. One individual could differ significantly from another. And that individual could himself change considerably over the course of time. A child abandoned in the woods would be little more than a common animal, whereas the same child reared and nurtured by an able educator would grow up to be a full human being, capable of reasoning and filled with an ardent desire to contribute to the well-being of others.

Iselin's description of man as a creature which kept oscillating between the sphere of the spirits and that of the common beasts was a direct and easily recognisable allusion to Albrecht von Haller's famous moral poems, *Gedanken über Vernunft, Aberglauben und Unglauben* (1729), and the *Über den Ursprung des Übels* (1734) where he had called man an "unfortunate mix of angels and beasts!"<sup>38</sup> In his poems (much admired by Kant) Haller argued that man was the only creature which did not occupy a fixed position within the great chain of being. Man belonged to both the natural and the spiritual world. While nature was subject to stable and uniform laws determined by a creator God, man was a free agent and therefore capable of both evil and good.

For God does not love constraint, the world with its faults is better than an empire of angels without wills; God does not value what is being done under constraint, it is only by choosing to act virtuously that an act becomes valuable. [...] God wanted us to love him on the basis of our understanding and not due to the blind force of some instinct which we did not choose.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Albrecht von Haller, *Die Alpen und andere Gedichte*, Stuttgart 1984, p. 24: "Unselig Mittel-Ding von Engeln und von Vieh! / Du prahlst mit der Vernunft und du gebrauchst sie nie". See also the poem, *über den Ursprung des Übels*, *ibid.*, p. 62-63: "Fern unter ihnen [the Angels] hat das sterbliche Geschlecht, / Im Himmel und im Nichts, sein doppelt Bürgerrecht. / Aus ungleich festem Stoff hat Gott es auserlesen, / Halb zu der Ewigkeit, halb aber zum Verwesen: / Zweideutig Mittelding von Engeln und von Vieh, / Es überlebt sich selbst, es stirbt und stirbet nie." Haller added a footnote to later editions of the *Gedichte* in which he pointed out that the *über den Ursprung des Übels* had been written prior to the publication of Pope's *An Essay on Man* where the latter had also famously described man as an inhabitant of both the natural and the spiritual world (I, 225ff.). See *ibid.*, p. 24, note 17: "Dieses ist einer der Gedanken, den der Verfasser mit dem Pope gemein hat. Er ist aber einige Jahre eher von dem Schweizer als von dem Engländer gebraucht worden."

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60-61: "Dann Gott liebt keinen Zwang, die Welt mit iren Mängeln / Ist

In a letter to Charles Bonnet, he insisted that "only man is in disorder; the rest of nature is being governed according to clear and uniform laws."<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, Haller vehemently rejected the idea of a moral science independent from revealed religion. Man's rational faculties allowed him to appreciate only the beauty of the external world and, as a result, gain trust in the omniscience and omnipotence of his creator.<sup>41</sup> Reason did not enable him to penetrate into the inner nature of things. From the study of the external world man could deduce that every living creature had its role to play, but not what this role might consist in. Haller ridiculed any attempt to show that the purpose of man could be reduced to the idea of happiness, that 'golden calf' of the Moderns, as he called it. Neither nature nor history could inform men about God's plan. History, Haller argued, displayed nothing but an endless scene of human folly and sinfulness. There was nothing to prove that men had ever fully lived in a state of innocence or according to the principles of nature. It was only at the end of time that the veil would be lifted and the true purpose of human existence revealed to mankind. In the meantime, humans had to place their trust in God's wisdom and freely subject themselves to his will as revealed in Scripture.<sup>42</sup>

besser als ein Reich von Willen-losen Engeln; / Gott hält vor ungetan, was man gezwungen tut, / Der Tugend Übung selbst wird durch die Wahl erst gut. [...] Gott wollte, dass wir ihn aus Kenntniss sollten lieben / Und nicht aus blinder Kraft von ungewählten Trieben; / Er gönnte dem Geschöpf den unschätzbaren Ruhm, / Aus Wahl ihm hold zu sein und nicht als Eigentum. / Der Taten Unterschied wird durch den Zwang gehoben; / Wir loben Gott nicht mehr, wann er uns zwingt zu loben".

<sup>40</sup> Haller to Bonnet (16 February 1762), in Otto Sonntag (ed.), *The Correspondence between Albrecht von Haller and Charles Bonnet*, Bern 1983, p. 257: "Le desordre n'est que dans l'homme; le reste de la nature est gouverné par des loix sures et uniformes."

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35: "Genug, es ist ein Gott; es ruft es die Natur, / Der ganze Bau der Welt zeigt seiner Hände Spur. / Den unermessnen Raum, in dessen lichten Höhen / Sich tausend Welten drehn und tausend Sonnen stehen, / Erfüllt der Gottheit Glanz. [...] Er teilt Bewegung, Ruh und jede Eigenschaft / Nach Mass und Absicht aus. Kein Stein bedeckt die Erde, / Wo Gottes Weisheit nicht in Wundern tätig werde; / Kein Tier ist so gering, du weisst, o Stähelin! / Es zielt doch jeder Teil nach seinem Zwecke hin [...]."

<sup>42</sup> There does not exist any modern intellectual biography of Haller. The most informative study of Haller's literary work is still Ludwig Hirzel (ed.), *Albrecht*

In one of his earliest poems, *Die Alpen* (1729), Haller had claimed that the life of the mountain shepherds captured an image of earthly paradise.<sup>43</sup> "What Epictetus did and Seneca wrote, one can see here being done freely and without learning".<sup>44</sup> Scholars have thus repeatedly argued that Haller, despite his hostility towards modern urban culture, was like Muralt a firm believer in the natural goodness of man, and that for him the alpine shepherd culture presented the last refuge of man's original state of innocence.<sup>45</sup> Haller, however, said no such thing. The uniformity of alpine life, he insisted, was the result of a particularly difficult climate, the absence of artificial needs and of all other forms of temptation modern, urban man was exposed to.<sup>46</sup> Thus, not even the study of Switzerland's Hesiodic shepherds could provide us with an understanding of man's real self.

Although Iselin took over Haller's image of man as a mixture of angels and beasts, he firmly distanced himself from the latter's claim that the pur-

von Hallers Gedichte (Frauenfeld 1882) which contains a lengthy, five hundred page introduction. See, Richard Toellner, *Albrecht von Haller. Über die Einheit im Denken des letzten Universalgelehrten*, Wiesbaden 1971; also *Albrecht von Haller. 1708-1777. Zehn Vorträge gehalten am Berner Haller-Symposion vom 6. bis 8. Oktober 1977*, Sonderdruck aus den Verhandlungen der Schweizerischen Naturforschenden Gesellschaft. Wissenschaftlicher Teil, Band 1977, Basel s. d.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 4: "Beglückte güldne Zeit, Geschenk der ersten Güte, / Oh, dass der Himmel dich so zeitig weggerückt! / Nicht, weil die junge Welt in stetem Frühling blühte / Und nie ein scharfer Nord die Blumen abgepflücket / [...] Nein, weil der Mensch zum Glücke den Überfluss nicht zählte, / Ihm Notdurft Reichtum war und Gold zum Sorgen fehlte! / Ihr Schüler der Natur, ihr kennt noch güldne Zeiten! / Nicht zwar ein Dichterreich voll fabelhafter Pracht; / Wer misst der äussern Glanz scheinbarer Eitelkeiten, / Wann Tugend Müh zur Lust und Armut glücklich macht? [...] Wohl dir, vergnügtes Volk! O danke dem Geschicke, / Das die, der Laster Quell, den Überfluss, versagt; / Dem, den sein Stand vergnügt; dient Armut selbst zum Glücke, / Da Pracht und Üppigkeit der Länder Stütze nagt."

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 6: "Was Epiktet getan und Seneca geschrieben, / Sieht man hier ungelehrt und ungezwungen üben."

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Ludwig Hirzel (ed.), *Albrecht von Hallers Gedichte*, p. LXX.

<sup>46</sup> We can see this from Haller's diary of his trip through the Swiss Alps during the summer of 1728, where he writes: "Heureux peuple, que l'ignorance préserve de tant de maux qui suivent la politesse des villes". Cited in *ibid.*, p. LXIV. While Haller was a great admirer of Muralt's critique of modern metropolitan life, there is no indication that he ever shared his pietist leanings or moral ideas.

pose of human existence necessarily remained unknown. Iselin's argument was while nature's plan for man could not be detected in the individual, it could be made visible through the study of the entire species. It was only in the entire species that the full potential of human talent was realised. For this reason alone, Iselin claimed, the study of man had to take the form, not just of history, but of a history of mankind.<sup>47</sup>

### 3.2. The History of Mankind as the history of the human mind

Scholars who wanted to study of the history of the entire species, Iselin warned, were faced with a serious methodological problem. The vastness of available data concerning the religion, customs, legal codes and political practices of past societies seemed to make any attempt to write down an even half-way credible account of human history virtually impossible. Historians thus necessarily had to have certain guiding principles which allowed them to find (or rather blaze) their path through this maze of experimental observations. Iselin insisted that the use of such guiding principles became necessary, not just because humans had only a limited amount of time at their disposal but also, and more importantly, because immersion in the vast ocean of facts was morally hazardous. Without adequate prepara-

<sup>47</sup> Iselin's claim that the purpose of human existence could only be grasped through the study of the history of mankind constituted, for some of his reviewers, one of the central ideas of the *Geschichte der Menschheit*. See, for example, Mendelssohn's review in the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 4 (1767), p. 233-234: "Die Geschichte der Staaten und Völker in ihrem weitesten Umfange betrachtet, enthält die Jahrbücher der Vorsehung Gottes, oder die Erzählung der Mittel, deren sich Gott bedient, das menschliche Geschlecht den nächsten Weg zu seiner Bestimmung zu führen. In eingeschränkten Zeiträumen, und bey einzelnen Völkern scheinen zwar die Absichten Gottes sich zu verbergen, und die Wege der Vorsehung sich in einem Labyrinth zu verlieren. Aus einem so niedern Gesichtspunkte können wir die Ordnung und Verbindung der Theile mit dem Ganzen unmöglich wahrnehmen, daher uns alles verwirrt und durch einander laufend scheinen muss. Je höher aber der Standort ist, den man sich wählt, je grösser der Raum ist, den man mit einem Blicke übersieht, desto sichtbarer wird die Ordnung des Ganzen, desto augenscheinlicher zeichnen sich die Wege der Vorsehung aus, wie sie durch alle Wendungen und Krümmungen zu einem gemeinschaftlichen hinlaufen."

tions, Iselin warned, historians would fall prey to the lure of moral indifference and historical Pyrrhonism. Its spectre could be banished only if history was studied through categories established by philosophy.

The great object of history is man. Whoever wishes to benefit from strolling across its immeasurable fields first has to turn to Philosophy in order to get to know its hero.<sup>48</sup>

Iselin's assertion that history had to be approached through philosophy was not, however, an argument about the pointlessness of historical scholarship. Nor did it imply that the external world was a world of mere appearances and illusions. What it meant was that the study of observations gathered from historical documents, travel writings and ancient codices was in itself not sufficient to understand the possible purpose, or real nature, of man. In the 'Introduction' to the *Patriotic Dreams*, where he had already tried to grapple with this problem, Iselin compared the impenetrability of history to the "disorder, confusion and darkness" that surrounded the inhabitants of Plato's cave.<sup>49</sup> As Iselin had explained to his readers, he was able to "gradually distinguish these dark objects, to place in them in the right relationship with one another and to establish astonishing connections between them" only once he began to analyse them according to his prior understanding of the real world.<sup>50</sup>

Although Iselin's philosophical position in the *Patriotic Dreams* was somewhat different from that in the *History of Mankind*, in particular with regard to the establishment of man's 'true nature', the solution he offered

<sup>48</sup> *Über die Geschichte der Menschheit*, Zürich 1770, vol. 1, p. 19: "Der grosse Gegenstand der Geschichte ist der Mensch. Wer mit dem Nutzen die unermesslichen Gefilde derselben durchwandern will, muss von der Philosophie gelernt haben, ihren Helden zu kennen."

<sup>49</sup> *Patriotic Dreams* (1758), p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8: "Ich fand eine neue Beschäftigung und Nahrung für meine Seele an der Vergleichung dessen was wirklich war, und dessen das seyn sollte. In dem Lande der Ideen fand ich nichts als Ordnung, Richtigkeit, Tugend, Gerechtigkeit und Erhabenheit. In dem Lande der Wirklichkeit hingegen nichts als Unordnung, Verwirrung, Falschheit, Scheintugend und betrügerische Grösse. Ein Metaphysicus, dem es vergönnet werden sollte, einsmals einen Blick in die Wahrheit der Gegenstände zu thun, mit denen er sich beschäftigt, würde keinen so grossen Unterschied zwischen seinem System und dem Wesen der Dinge finden, als ich hier nach und nach entdeckete."

was roughly the same, namely that experimental data, if it was to be used for explaining the purpose of man, had to be made comprehensible through prior established analytical categories.

Iselin believed that the correct analytical categories could only derive from our understanding of the working of the human mind. The reason for this, he suggested, was because the mind could gain a clear understanding only of itself. The history of mankind, hence, could only be understood as a history of the human mind.

In the previous chapter, we have already encountered Iselin's account of the human mind, so a few additional comments will suffice. Iselin's central idea was that the mind is naturally active; it is constantly seeking pleasurable sensations derived from the processing of both sensory and intellectual data. Iselin claimed that a well-formed mind ranked the pleasures it gained from comparing intellectual data higher than the pleasures obtained from the comparing of mere sensory impressions. From this he concluded that the mind had a natural tendency to develop its capacity to form general ideas and, in so doing, to develop the faculty of reason [*Vernunft*]. The mind passed from a 'state of pure sensuousness' to a 'state of reason'. However, he also insisted that (in most cases, at least) the development of reason was not a linear process. Often, the human mind seemed unable to progress beyond the stage of what he called 'common sense' [*Gemeiner Verstand*], the basic ability of the mind to detect the likeness and difference between incoming sensory data. Iselin believed that this interruption could be attributed to the influence of 'imagination'. Imagination combined already stored data in order to create new ideas which it then presented to the mind as possible sources of future pleasure. Although the faculty of imagination was crucial for mental development, it could equally be harmful because, as Iselin explained, the projection of possible future sensual pleasures could render the mind insensitive to more 'refined', abstract, intellectual pleasures. Imagination became particularly harmful when it neutralised the faculty of judgement, the ability of the mind to correct previously established general ideas in the light of new sensory data. This occurred when it prevented the mind from developing a more accurate – and hence rational – understanding of the external world. Iselin called this the 'state of imagination'. In terms of moral psychology, it was also the state where the passions reigned supreme.

While some minds were capable of gradually reducing the influence of imagination and becoming more sensitive to higher forms of intellectual pleasures, others seemed unable to do so, and, as a result, remained stuck in a 'state of imagination'. In the second half of Book One, Iselin argued that this difference was in part due to the natural differences among humans. In most cases, however, it was caused by the interplay of various external factors such as the constitution of the body, the climate it lived in and, most importantly, its physical proximity to other human bodies.

In the *History of Mankind* Iselin used his account of the mind as an explanatory framework for understanding not just the larger principles underlying the development of the human species. He also used it in order to explain the difference between various societies and the reasons why certain people had progressed while others remained in a state of rawness. Just like the mind, the human race started its journey from a 'state of sensuousness' which Iselin also called mankind's 'infancy'. It then progressed to the youthful 'state of imagination' which he associated with 'barbarism'. Finally, the human species entered the state of 'adulthood' or of reason. Iselin admitted that it was difficult to say at what point in time a particular people, let alone the entire species, moved from one stage to the next. Partly he thought that this was not necessary; mostly, however, Iselin believed that any attempt to impose a strict chronology on human history was simply impossible because the vast majority of past societies consisted of a blend of both barbarous and rational elements. Even existing societies, he claimed, still bore the hallmark of barbarism. The rational elements were confined to a small group of friends of mankind who had committed themselves to try and lead the rest of their fellow-citizens, including the rich and the powerful, into adulthood.

Although Iselin insisted that history became accessible only through philosophy, he was keen to stress that his *History of Mankind* was real history. It was not simply philosophy to which he had added some randomly selected historical illustrations. The conclusions he had drawn from history, he claimed, were all based on observation; they were the result of historical investigation, not mere speculation. All philosophy could do was provide analogies and analytical frameworks which the study of history subsequently had to confirm or reject. Philosophers thus continuously had to ask themselves whether "man in nature [*Mensch in der Natur*] is really the same

we believe to have found in abstract thought or whether he is something completely different?"<sup>51</sup> Philosophy, on its own, "is always weak unless it is supported by the former, while the former is mostly useless, often even harmful, unless enlightened by [philosophy]."<sup>52</sup> In the *Preface* to a later edition he even claimed that the idea of a purposeful nature occurred to him only during the course of his investigation into past societies. "I found the idea without looking for it; it is the fruit, the result of my research [...]. I did not say beforehand, I want to find the truth – I only said I want to look for it."<sup>53</sup>

Iselin's wish not to be classified as a mere speculative thinker who, as Herder insinuated, deliberately left out facts that contradicted his theory and invented others to support it, was already made clear on the title-page of his work.<sup>54</sup> Here, Iselin quoted the opening lines from Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* (1733): "Let us, since live [sic] can little more supply, Than

<sup>51</sup> *Ueber die Geschichte der Menschheit*, vol. 1, p. 147.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>53</sup> *Geschichte der Menschheit*, Karlsruhe 1784, xxiii-xxiv: "Dieser Fortgang der Menschheit von der äussersten Einfalt zu einem immer höhern Grade von Licht und von Wohlstande, welcher die herrschende Idee meines Werkes ausmacht, ist mir erst in dem Laufe meiner Untersuchungen über die G. d. M. in den Sinn gekommen. Ich habe diese Idee gefunden, ohne eben sie zu suchen; Sie ist die Frucht, das Resultat meiner Untersuchungen: Sie war nicht die Absicht davon. Wenn mein Werk der Beweis ist: so ist es doch nicht unternommen worden um sie zu beweisen. Ich habe nicht meine Untersuchungen auf sie gerichtet, sondern meine Untersuchungen haben mich geführt. Ich sagte nicht vorher ich will die Wahrheit da finden – sondern nur ich will sie suchen".

<sup>54</sup> J. G. Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie zur Geschichte der Bildung der Menschheit*, Stuttgart 1990, p. 37: "Wer bisher unternommen, den Fortgang der Jahrhunderte zu entwickeln, hat meistens die Lieblingsidee auf der Fahrt: Fortgang zu mehrerer Tugend und Glückseligkeit einzelner Menschen. Dazu hat man alsdenn Fakta erhöht oder erdichtet: Gegenfakta verkleinert oder verschwiegen; ganze Seiten bedeckt; Wörter für Wörter genommen, Aufklärung für Glückseligkeit, und mehre feinere Ideen für Tugend – und so hat man "von der allgemeinfortgehenden Verbesserung der Welt" Romane gemacht – die keiner glaubte, wenigstens nicht der wahre Schüler der Geschichte und des menschlichen Herzens." Herder referred not only repeatedly to Iselin but also to the *Patriotic Society's* prize questions which he claimed were the cause for this wave of overly optimistic studies of human development. (p. 34f.)



just to look about us and to die, Expatriate free o'er all this scene of man". It is curious that Iselin scholars never wondered why he decided to leave out the concluding line which reads, "A mighty maze! but not without a plan".<sup>55</sup> Pope's fourth line was the necessary conclusion a reader had to reach after having digested Iselin's history of the human species.

### 3.3. Freedom as the mastering of nature

Showing (or believing) that history revealed an intelligent cause orienting the development of the human race was one thing; showing that nature's plan was to make man a self-governing being was another. Here, Iselin presented essentially two different arguments. The first centred on Iselin claim, mentioned above, that the human mind necessarily had to pass through three distinct phases and that these phases could also be found in the history of the entire species. Iselin did not believe that mankind had already reached the full stage of maturity and reason. The fact, however, that the two first great cultures within human history, namely the agrarian kingdoms of the East and the Mediterranean republics of ancient Greece and Rome, seemed to fit the moral psychologists' characterisation of late infancy and youth, the state of sensuousness and the state of imagination and passionate love for everything great and beautiful, indicated that Europe would eventually lead mankind towards adulthood and initiate the third and final state of reason and lasting happiness. According to Iselin, Europe was still centuries away from reaching full adulthood, and in the *Introduction* he admitted that, to the uninitiated, these expectations might "resemble enthusiastic dreams, rather than reasoned and sane hopes".<sup>56</sup> Yet, he insisted that, because the history

<sup>55</sup> Alexander Pope, *Pope. Poetical works*, Herbert Davis (ed.), Oxford 1989, p. 241.

<sup>56</sup> *Über die Geschichte der Menschheit*, Zürich 1770, vol. 1, p. 13: "Vielleicht aber sehen diese Aussichten mehr enthusiastischen Träumereyen, als vernünftigen und gesunden Hoffnungen gleich. Es mag seyn. Wenn aber die Einfalt und die Sinnlichkeit, welche die ruhigen und gutartigen Orientaler dem Joche erhabener und wohlthätiger Gesetze unterworfen; wenn die Einbildung [...], welche die Eitelkeit der Griechen und den Stolz der Römer zu bewundernswürdigen Thaten angefeuert haben; wenn diese minder vortrefflichen Triebräder ganzen Völkern einen, obwohl vorübergehenden, dennoch sehr kostbaren Wohlstand gewähret haben; so können

of the human species could only be understood in analogy to the progress of the human mind, there was no reason not to assume that the state of reason would be man's ultimate state – unless, of course, one rejected his philosophy of the mind.<sup>57</sup>

Iselin's second argument in support of his claim that nature worked towards making man a self-governing being was that man himself was the primary cause of his cultural development. One of the central aspirations in his *History of Mankind*, he repeatedly argued, was to show that nothing had a greater influence on man than other men. Even the inhabitants of the early societies, the large agrarian societies of the East or the barbarous tribes of the North, with their erroneous beliefs about the external world, strove to realise their chosen ends. As soon as man raised himself above the lowest level of mental activity and, with the help of his imagination, began to anticipate the future, he started to display the first glimmer of intention-

wir nicht ohne allen Grund uns vorstellen, dass der mit denselben vereinigte Anwachs der Erleuchtung und der Vernunft dem menschlichen Geschlechte eine dauerhaftere und erhabener Glückseligkeit verspreche." See also *ibid.*, p. 331: "Sind aber diese Bestimmungen, dieser Fortgang zu einem vortrefflichem Stande auch in der Natur gegründet? Sind sie nicht mehr als Träume gutherziger Philosophen, welche den Stand des gesitteten Menschen so herrlich finden, weil sie darinn geboren sind? Haben nicht Wilde, welche man an die europäischen Lebens-Art hat gewöhnen wollen, sich wieder mit Gewalt losgerissen, und zu ihren Mitbrüdern geflüchtet? Und ist diese Vollkommenheit daher nicht eher als eine Sache anzusehen, welche der Natur des unverdorbenen Menschen gänzlich zuwiderläuft?"

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 14-16: "Als ein Kind genießt der Mensch schwache, aber unschuldige und ihm sehr kostbare Vergnügen. Ohne Hochachtung, ohne Bewunderung zu verdienen, ist sein Zustand angenehm und erwünscht. Mit jedem Anwachs seiner Fähigkeiten werden seine Gefühle und seine Begierden lebhafter; und so gerät der Jüngling desto leichter in die Unordnung, wie grosser die Gaben sind, mit welchen ihn die Natur begünstigt hat. Die Einbildung erhitzt seine Sinnlichkeit und setzt ihn in die Gefahr der äussersten Ausschweifung. Glücklich ist der Mann, wenn noch die Vernunft ihn an dem Rande des Verderbens antrifft, und seinen Gang durch ihre wohlthätige Fackel beleuchtet. Dieses Glück, welches einzelnen Menschen bisweilen gewährt wird, sollte es ganzen Völkern nicht endlich auch einmal zu Theile werden? Unsere Ahnen waren vor wenigen Jahrhunderten noch vollkommene Barbaren. Wir können uns schmeicheln, die Hälfte von ihrer Barbarei abgelegt zu haben. Warum sollten unsre Nachkömmlinge sich nicht von allen Ueberbleibseln derselben befreien können?"

ality. He formed ideals which he sought to realise. At the same time, his actions and ideals acquired an ever growing importance for other humans. By displaying skills which others could imitate and by communicating his ideas to others, he could directly influence their view of the external world and, up to a point, also their behaviour. The history of mankind showed how men, whenever circumstances permitted the free development of sociability, language and communication, slowly but gradually developed their faculty of reason and began questioning the authority of those who had so far maintained a monopoly on interpreting the external world (fortune-tellers, priests, the church, philosophers, and so on).

Nature, Iselin agreed, did play a considerable role in the early stages of human development. Not only did nature provide men with a soul that was constantly hungry for new forms of pleasures, nature equally influenced the pace (at least initially) at which different societies established ideas of the common good, virtue, legality and humanity. Nature, however, could only take the first step; it could not bring its plan to fruition itself. The more civilised man became, the more he escaped the immediate influence of nature. The *History of Mankind*, hence, was the history of man's attempt to struggle free from nature's tutelage.

According to Iselin, it was only through the control of his political and natural environment that man could become a self-governing being. Only in civilised, lawful and affluent societies where a highly developed division of labour put the diversity of human talents to the use of the entire community and enabled men to engage in activities of leisure could one see general, wide-spread human flourishing. In contrast, an individual with a completely erroneous understanding of the laws governing the external world, and who continuously and single-handedly had to fight for his daily survival, could be nothing but a "natural slave" or, more accurately, a 'slave of nature'.<sup>58</sup>

For men to reduce and ultimately escape the influence of nature they had to control the satisfaction of their needs. This required both control over artificial desires and also control of the production of basic goods. By draining swamps, clearing rocks from fields, and building dams and canals, men could even change the climate they lived in.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 323.

However much significance one wants to attribute to the influence of climate, it cannot be denied that the spread of the light of reason, of industry, will gradually improve even the harshest of climates [...]. Even in the harshest of climates, as soon as reason and industry begin to develop as a result of the contact with and the observation of other more civilised people, the morals and the character of its inhabitants will begin to acquire a different form. I venture even further: The climate in the wider sense of the word ceases to be the same. Dried swamps, cleared forests, cultivated lands, will necessarily change the air, the diet and everything else in a country; and such a fortunate alteration will undoubtedly also have a particular influence on the bodies and minds of the inhabitants.<sup>59</sup>

Changing one's climate, Iselin concluded (with reference to Machiavelli), had therefore to be seen as a central task of moral legislation.<sup>60</sup> Controlling the environment also included acquiring the technological know-how needed to improve agriculture, to optimise processes of production, and to develop better machines. Men had to control health hazards by developing better diets; they had to contain the spread of diseases and improve public hygiene. Mastering the environment, Iselin insisted, also meant overcoming superstitious belief and fear of the unknown by acquiring a better understanding of the outside world. Only intelligent beings could be free: "Ignorance creates slavery".<sup>61</sup> And since the unconstrained development of the human mind could only take place in societies where the protection of

<sup>59</sup> See especially Book One, Chapter 22, "Einflüsse des Himmelsstriches und der Landesart in die Sitten", *ibid.*, p. 67: "So gross also immer die Macht des Himmelstriches angenommen werde mag, so ist doch richtig, dass die Ausbreitung des Lichtes der Vernunft, der Künste, das rohste Clima allmählich verbessern." Also, p. 68: "So lang die Einwohner einer Gegend keine besondere Anbauung geniessen; so lang ihr Land unverbessert in seinem ursprünglichen Zustande verbleibet; so lang wird ohne Zweifel der Einfluss des Himmelstriches der vorzügliche Bestimmunggrund ihrer Sitten sein. So bald aber ein einem andern auch noch so rohen Lande Verstand und Kunst durch den Umgang und durch die Beyspiele gesitteterer Völker anfangen sich auszubreiten; so bald werden die Sitten und die Gemüthsarten seiner Bewohner anfangen, eine andere Gestalt anzunehmen. Ich gehe weiter: Das Clima in dem ausgedehntem Verstande höret auf dasselbige zu seyn. Ausgetrocknete Moräste, ausgebeutete Waldungen, angebaute Felder, müssen die Luft, die Nahrungsart und alles in einem Lande ändern".

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69, note \*: "Machiavel *Discours politiques*, L. I. Ch. I. zeigt, dass es die erste Sorge des Stifters eines Staates seyn soll, die schädlichen Einflüsse des Climas zu verbessern."

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.



the individual was considered of primary importance, freedom from nature went hand in with political freedom. Only once these various conditions had been met and once that men could develop their sociability without having to fear any sudden interruption by the forces of nature that the latter could reach a state of genuine freedom.

True sociability, real softening, real morality, require an advantageous disposition of bodies and minds – a favourable blend of characters, a well-arranged union of manifold gifts and talents. [...] They alone clear the way for the law of reason – and which is needed if men want to be happy and nations flourish. Only these [advantages] promote the slow progress of man from a life of solitude to a sociable union, from slavery to a civil constitution, from the most humiliating submission to the highest degree of freedom.<sup>62</sup>

#### 4. *The realisation of freedom through 'sociability' and 'unsociability'*

##### 4.1. *Republican monarchy*

I now wish to discuss a second aspect of Iselin's political theory in the *History of Mankind*, namely his history of modern liberty. In the concluding chapter of Book Eight, he offered his readers a glimpse of a better future, where men would live in a state of real freedom. None of the existing state in Europe, not even republics, Iselin argued, had so far managed to realise real freedom. Republics had introduced only one important aspect of it: equality

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339-340: "Eine wahre Geselligkeit, eine wahre Milderung, wahre Sitten, erfordern eine vortheilhafte Anlage der Leiber und der Geister, – eine glückliche Mischung der Gemüths-Arten, eine wolgeordnete Vereinigung mannifaltiger Gaben und Geschicke. Ohne diese Vorzüge können weder einzelne Menschen zu dem Gefühle der Schönheit, der Grösse, und der Ordnung erhoben, noch ganze Gesellschaften zu dem Genusse der glückseligen Früchte derselben fähig gemacht werden. – Durch dieselben allein wird der Vernunft die Ausübung der Rechte erleichtert, – welche sie behaupten muss, um die Menschen glücklich, und die Völker blühend zu machen. Durch diese allein werden die langsamen Fortgänge befördert, durch welche die Menschen von dem zerstreuten Leben zu einer geselligen Vereinigung, von der Slavery zu einer bürgerlichen Verfassung, von der niedrigsten Unterwürfigkeit zu der erhabensten Freyheit gelangen."

before the law and the right to elect one's rulers. Republican liberty, however, was exclusive and, in most cases, was understood to mean little else than the right of the citizens to contest authority and to exploit the subject territories. In several passages of the *History of Mankind*, Iselin launched an almost vitriolic attack against the complacency of his Swiss contemporaries. Swiss politics, he claimed, and, in particular, the Swiss republics' criminal legislation were remnants of a 'barbaric', feudal past.<sup>63</sup> Iselin predicted that the Federation with its archaic customs and incessant internal feud would either have to give way to a unitary state or end up on the scrap-heap of history. The best chance for the blossoming of real freedom on Swiss soil depended on replacing the city republics with a mild form of monarchy.

Could it be possible that the liberty of the republicans is not yet the true liberty which should adorn a civil society in its best moments? Could it not be that [republican liberty], rather than being in accordance with the eternal laws of justice, goes against the latter? [...] Would it not be possible to think that there existed an even more precious, more noble form of liberty; – one which an enlightened and mild form of monarchy would have to introduce? Could one not say that republican constitutions were the seedbeds of all that is good and useful? – but that these precious plants can only grow to their full size in the mild and light air of monarchies.<sup>64</sup>

Republican liberty, thus, was merely a stepping stone towards a higher, general form of liberty.<sup>65</sup> An anonymous reviewer in the *Journal Helvétique* described this as "a surprising idea from the mouth of a republican".<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Iselin's critique of existing republican states was even more pronounced in the second edition. In a letter to Zimmermann of 24 April 1768 he wrote: "Ich habe in mancher Stelle der neuen Auflage G.[eschichte] der M.[enschheit] den republikanischen Stolz darnieder zu schlagen gesucht – und ich habe unsre Verfassungen ohne Schein der Ungerechtigkeit angeklagt. – Ich hoffe Sie werden in Ihrem neuen Nationalstolze diese Vorurtheile unserer Landsleute auch nicht ungestraft hingehen lassen". Cited in Alfred Stern, "Über Isaak Iselins Geschichte der Menschheit", p. 247. See, especially, his discussion of the European republics in *Ueber die Geschichte der Menschheit*, Zürich 1770, vol. 2, p. 307f.

<sup>64</sup> *Ueber die Geschichte der Menschheit*, Zürich 1770, vol. 2, p. 352-354.

<sup>65</sup> See, *ibid.*, p. 310-311: "Der vornehmste dieser Vorzüge war das Recht, durch selbst erwählte obrigkeitliche Personen regiert zu werden, an sich selbst nicht die wesentliche Freyheit, sondern nur eine Stufe darzu."

<sup>66</sup> "Une triste expérience lui découvre, que la liberté des Républicains n'est point réelle, que les Patriciens s'élèvent injustement sur la vertu, la sagesse & le mérite

Iselin's defence of enlightened monarchy, however, was neither an endorsement of existing monarchical regimes nor, as Herder had insinuated, a self-congratulatory reflex about the accomplishments of eighteenth-century Europe.<sup>67</sup> In the same section, Iselin made it quite clear that the existing monarchies, even those which had embarked on reforms, were still far away from becoming, what he called, a 'mild' or 'enlightened' monarchy. "All monarchies we know of", Iselin wrote, "are still a long distance away from [having cultivated] the noble reason [*Vernunft*] which alone can lead them to perfection."<sup>68</sup> "Those happy days are still far away"; and, "innumerable obstacles still bar the route to the outbreak [of virtue and reason]."<sup>69</sup>

What Iselin pleaded for was a new form of political society which combined both republican and monarchical elements. Mendelssohn, always a perceptive reader, characterised Iselin's ideal polity as a monarchical republic or a republican monarchy.

At the end of his new edition, he says it is under a republican constitution where citizens can most easily develop virtue, wisdom and talent and where each and every one's other-regarding inclinations can be best stimulated and brought into harmony with the common good; the best monarchy would be the one that most resembled a republic and the best republic which most resembled a monarchy.<sup>70</sup>

des Citoïens d'un rang inférieur: Que ce n'est que sous une Monarchie tempérée, où la raison régné dans toute sa maturité, que le Citoïens jouit d'un bonheur véritable. Réflexion surprenante dans la bouche d'un Républicain". *Journal Helvétique*, September 1769, p. 246-247.

<sup>67</sup> J. G. Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie*, p. 49: "[J]eder klassische Schöndenker, der die Polizierung unsers Jahrhunderts fürs non plus ultra der Menschheit hält, hat Gelegenheit, [...] über das Licht unsers Jahrhunderts, das ist, über seinen Leichtsinnsinn und Ausgelassenheit, über seine Wärme in Ideen und Kälte in Handlungen, über seine scheinbare Stärke und Freiheit, und über seine wirkliche Todesschwäche und Ermattung unter Unglauben, Despotismus und üppigkeit zu lobjauchzen. Davon sind alle Bücher unserer Voltaire und Hume, Robertsons und Iselins voll".

<sup>68</sup> *Ueber die Geschichte der Menschheit*, Zürich 1770, vol. 2, p. 354.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417 and 422.

<sup>70</sup> "Zuletzt, sagt er in der neuen Ausgabe, die republikanische Verfassung ist, in welcher Tugend, Weisheit und Talente sich am leichtesten unter den Bürgern ausbreiten, und die gemeinnützigen Eigenschaften eines jeden am ungehindertsten und in dem vortheilhaftesten Ebenmaasse zum allgemeinen Besten thätig werden können, und die beste Monarchie würde wohl diejenige seyn, welche einer Republik, und die beste Republik diejenige, welche einer Monarchie am nächsten käme." *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 1780, XL, 1, p. 26.

As Iselin tried to show in his book, it was only through the constant interaction between republican and monarchical elements that real freedom could be both realised and maintained. The republicans' equality and their love of fatherland had to shed its exclusive character and become more general and inclusive. Iselin believed that this could be achieved only through the softening influence of monarchical civilisation. The high level of civilisation, on the other hand, which had developed under monarchies required the impetus of republicanism to give it form and to redirect it away from the frivolous and towards the useful. From Iselin's perspective, the road to freedom was thus very much a dialectical process, where each interaction between liberty (in the sense of independence) and civilisation led to a higher, more advanced, level of "order and reality".<sup>71</sup>

Freedom is a precious fruit of wisdom, enlightenment, virtue; it is also the most effective means to generate these inestimable faculties. It is only through their mutual influence [i.e. between freedom and enlightenment] that [...] individual men and entire people become ready for true happiness.<sup>72</sup>

Only once republican liberty had been generalised and monarchical civilisation been turned into genuine morality could a state of real freedom and lasting happiness become real.

Once the soft rays of light and of an improved learning will break through more forcefully; once they begin to shine across our blissful continent brightly; once they will pour their blessed influence everywhere into noble and magnanimous souls; our more worthy descendants can hope to enjoy a state of general happiness. [...] In such

<sup>71</sup> Towards the end of Book Eight, Iselin describes evil as the "lack of reality" and man's striving for an ever higher status of perfection as based on the "nature of reality." See *ibid.*, p. 427: "Eine jede gute Handlung zeuget, wie ich es mir vorstelle, allemal eine andre; eine jede entstehende Vollkommenheit wird das Werkzeug einer grössern. Wenn wir schon diese glückliche Fortpflanzung sehr selten wahrnehmen, so ist sie nicht weniger in der Natur der Realität, in der Natur des wahren Guten gegründet. Von dem Schlimmen hingegen kann ich das nämliche nicht glauben. Es bestehet in dem Mangel der Realität und der Ordnung, und es ist von einer Natur, welche sich durch sich selbst zernichtet."

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 126: "Die Freyheit ist eine kostbare Frucht der Weisheit, der Erleuchtung, der Tugend; und sie ist auch das wirksamste Mittel, diese unschätzbaren Eigenschaften zu entwickeln. Diese glückseligen wechselweisen Einflüsse [...] allein machen einzelne Menschen und ganze Völker zu einer wahren Glückseligkeit reif."

better times only will the true and noble purpose of civil society come to the fore; and offer the common wealth as a whole as well as to each individual the best and most pleasant existence, prosperity and happiness they are capable of. *True freedom* will then show itself in full splendour and be seen as much more desirable than the *apparent independence* of the republican. Reason will destroy the, in any case, insignificant distinction between the various forms of government; every citizen will be equally free, equally secure, equally subjected to the rule of law, and equally happy, irrespective of the constitution he happens to live under; *love*, the only good principle of any constitution, will triumph and spread its blessed influence amongst all estates.<sup>73</sup>

Iselin claimed that this was the state in which nature had intended man to live. The philosophical study of human history showed that the interaction between, and ultimate merger of, republican and monarchical systems was merely the last phase of a long dialectical process between two fundamentally different, yet, complementary principles: 'sociability' and 'unsociability'.

As Iselin explained, this process was set in motion once men had left the state of pure sensuousness. "From this point onwards, the entire human species seems to divide itself naturally into two different groups."<sup>74</sup> Depending on the geographic location and climatic conditions of their birthplace, men formed societies that were founded either on sociability or on unsociability. While those people who happened to live in mild climates, in particu-

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 432-435: "Wenn die sanften Stralen des Lichtes und einer bessern Gelehrsamkeit mächtiger hervorbrechen; wenn sie über unsern glückseligen Welttheil mit einem hellen Glanze sich ausbreiten; wenn sie allerorten in edle und grossmüthige Seelen ihre seligen Einflüsse ergiessen werden; alsdenn hoffet billig eine bessere Nachkommenschaft einer allgemeinen Glückseligkeit theilhaft zu werden. [...] In solchen bessern Tagen wird erst der wahre und grosse Zweck der bürgerlichen Vereinigung sich entwikel;n; und wie dem ganzen gemeinen Wesen, jedem Gliede desselben die beste und angenehmste Art des Daseyns, deren sie fähig sind, den Wolstand und die Glückseligkeit gewähren. Alsdenn erst wird die wahre Freyheit unendlich viel liebenswürdiger als die scheinbare Unabhängigkeit des Republicaners in ihrem vollen Glanze sich zeigen. Alsdenn wird der im Grunde so unbeträchtliche Unterschied der Regierungsform von der Vernunft zernichtet; alsdenn wird in jeder Verfassung jeder Bürger gleich frey, gleich sicher, gleich den Gesetzen unterworfen, gleich glücklich seyn; alsdenn wird die Liebe, das einzige gute Triebrad jeder Verfassung triumphierend seine seligen Einflüsse über alle Stände ausgiessen."

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 215.

lar along the South-eastern shores of the Mediterranean, developed more quickly and were soon able to form abstract, general ideas, including ideas about 'perfection', 'order' and 'justice', those living in the harsh climates of the North developed more slowly. Not only that, their mental progress was brought to a near standstill because of an over-developed imagination.

The simplest, the most natural sentiments of the heart became corrupted, [...] or were, at least, much reduced. The seed for great talents, which lie inside the soul, were destroyed or poisoned. The faculty of judgement remained in a deep slumber and the mind in a state of horrible rawness.<sup>75</sup>

Any more permanent cultural development had to result from the coming together of these two types of society. For Iselin it was thus absolutely crucial to explain why neither of them was capable of realising freedom and human flourishing on their own, not even the society based on natural sociability. For this, we need to turn to Books Three to Six where Iselin described the parallel development of these two contrasting, archetypical societies in great detail; their religious cults, their economic systems, their laws and their politics. It is important to summarise at least some of their main characteristics. I shall start with the 'sociable' people from the mild climates.

#### 4.2. The Oriental model of sociability

In mild climates, Iselin argued, "everything was arranged so as to open the minds to mild and sociable inclinations and to make these fortunate regions become the first home to humanity [*Menschlichkeit*] and mild moeurs."<sup>76</sup> Although even Oriental people had to pass through a stage of 'barbarism', where the mind was controlled by the imagination, Iselin maintained that, because of the climate and the general abundance of food, this stage would have been neither as long nor as violent as in the North. Sociability, hence, could develop easily:

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 216-217: "Die einfachesten und die natürlichen Empfindungen des Herzens arteten aus, wurden verwildert, oder schränkten sich zumindest sehr ein. Die Samen der grossen Fähigkeiten, welche in der Seele liegen, wurden zernichtet, oder vergiftet. Der Geist blieb in einer tiefen Schlagsucht und das Gemüth in einer abscheulichen Rohigkeit."

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 343.

Early on, the pain and trouble of one man had to evoke a vivid sentiment in another man. Early on, the pleasure of one man places the sympathetic soul of another man in a pleasurable condition.<sup>77</sup>

Because Oriental people were more sensitive to the pleasure and pain of other men, than their cousins in the North, they were also the first to develop language and a sense of beauty and of order. This in turn, Iselin maintained, allowed them to enter into conjugal relationships, to found large families and to establish ideas of the common good. The principle of life within the community became: "to want nothing but the greatest possible well-being of the entire association [...]. Thus, began the public spirit, the spring of a common weal, to show its effectiveness."<sup>78</sup> Iselin ends Book Four with an account of the development of religion and how this contributed to strengthening the communal ties. In Book Five, Iselin then goes on to describe how the large pastoral tribes from the East were incorporated into larger political societies. This transition to a political state, he believed, was brought about by a number of factors of which the first was the multiplication of needs which compelled families, who had so far been autonomous, to co-operate more closely with one another and introduce a primitive form of exchange economy.<sup>79</sup> Economic co-operation then led to the gradual formation of a common language, the further spread of sociability and a more general understanding of the notion of 'common good'.

It also led to the establishment of a clearer idea of property. In its earliest form, the idea of property was nothing but the association the mind made of

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 345: "Frühe erzeugeten da der Schmerz und der Verdruss eines Menschen, dem andern eine lebhaftere Empfindung. Frühe setzte da die Freude des einen auch die sympathetische Seele des andern in eine freudige Verfassung."

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 368-369: "So entwickelte sich allmählich der kostbare Keim des grossen Grundsatzes, [...] nur das grösste mögliche Wol der ganzen Vereinigung zu verlangen [...]. So fieng der öffentliche Geist\* [\* Esprit public] der Trieb für ein gemeinsames Wol an, sich wirksam zu zeigen."

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 11: "So vermehrt die erhöhte Erfindsamkeit den Ueberfluss, und so erweiterte dieser die niemals ruhigen Begierden. Bey den vervielfältigten Bedürfnissen war eine Familie nicht mehr im Stande, sich alles dasjenige selbst anzuschaffen, was ihre wirkliche oder eingebildete Nothdurft erforderte. Die eine entlehnte der andern Hilfe, und liess derselben dagegen die ihrige angedeyen. Den Ueberfluss, welchen sich die eine erworben hatte, ersetzte den Mangel der andern."

a past pleasurable sentiment with a particular object. According to Iselin this could be the graves of one's ancestors, the memorials of dead friends, wells, even an entire region where wandering tribes had encountered abundance of food.<sup>80</sup> The first form of property, hence, was always communal and lasted only as long as it was occupied by its inhabitants.<sup>81</sup> Through the invention of agriculture pastoral families became settled; they formed notions of private property and, with increasing population density, introduced the division of labour (Iselin does not mention scarcity of food).

Hence, could naturally have emerged, [...] communes and cities. Through this fortunate association of many men, the development of talents and the perfection of the arts were encouraged and became ever easier, because each new example enriched [man's] inventiveness and enflamed his emulation.<sup>82</sup>

Iselin claimed that the increasingly developed economy made the maintaining of order and the protection of private property the chief priority of Oriental man. Accordingly, the idea of virtue was never associated with independence but with loyalty and obedience.<sup>83</sup> Their natural desire for emulation, on the other hand, made them easily accept the authority of any gifted and determined individual capable of providing them with new ideas and new skills. According to Iselin, the 'natural' disposition of this sociable people towards order and peace was also the cause for the sudden interruption of its cultural development.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 14-15.

<sup>81</sup> See, *ibid.*, p. 17-18: "Eine Gegend konnte also das Eigenthum eines Geschlechtes, eines Volkes oder ihrer Götter werden, ohne dass irgend ein Glied desselben auf einen Theil davon ein besonders Recht erlangt hätte. [...] Dieses scheint der erste Grad des Eigenthums gewesen zu seyn, dessen sich der Mensch an der Erde angemasset hat; und natürlicher Weise dauerte derselbe nicht länger, als so lange die Besitzer wirklich bey dem Lande gegenwärtig waren, zu dem sie sich ein Recht erworben hatten."

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 22-23: "So konnten natürlicher Weise, ohne fernere Ueberlegung, Gemeinden und Städte entstanden seyn. Durch diesen glücklichen Zusammenfluss vieler Menschen wurde die Entwicklung der Talente, und die Erhöhung der Künste immer mehr erleichtert und befördert, indem jedes neue Beyspiel die Erfindsamkeit bereicherte, und die Nacheiferung entflammte."

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 30 and 41; see also p. 77: "Die sanften Künste des Friedens haben für wohlgeartete Menschen unendlich mehr Reize als die rohen Unordnungen des Krieges, und die Ruhe ist solchen weit lieber als die Unabhängigkeit."

Before the great idea of liberty was able to develop in their minds, despotism had already established its rights or, shall I say, abuses, in the most beautiful part of the globe. Its civil law was very brief: the prince and the priest had every to say, the people nothing.<sup>84</sup>

Not having attached any value to independence or developed any noticeable form of patriotism, Oriental people became the natural prey to ambitious individuals. Furthermore, not having a sufficiently developed mind for them to become sensitive to purely intellectual pleasures, Oriental people, who had fallen under the spell of God-despots and their priests, felt little inclination towards philosophical enquiry. Rather, Oriental man

is content with remaining in a state of idiocy, which is much dearer to his born laziness than all the treasures of science, which our own dissatisfied scholars try to dig up mostly without success.<sup>85</sup>

Because under Oriental despotism philosophy was a "secret of state" and intimately linked with local religion it "remained exactly the same over many centuries".<sup>86</sup>

#### 4.3. *The Northern model of unsociability*

According to Iselin, the development of Northerners presented an exact mirror-image of this Southern story; the only similarity was that their cultural development, too, was incapable of progressing beyond a certain point. Iselin depicts Northern man as brutal version of Rousseau's savage: a solitary being but without pity. Already his diet which, Iselin claimed, consisted of roots, fruits, fish and game and the other meager produce of Northern climes, had to have an impact on both his physical and mental

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 81: "Ehe noch in den Seelen der grosse Gedanke der Freyheit entwickelt seyn konnte, hatte bereits der Despotismus seine Rechte, oder soll ich sagen, seine Missbräuche? in dem schönsten Theile des Erdbodens vestgesetzt. Das Staatsrecht war da kurz; der Fürst und der Priester hatten alles, und das Volk nichts zu sagen."

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 96-97: "Er überlässt sich desshalben mit Vergnügen seinem ruhigen Idiotismus, welcher seiner angeborenen Trägheit unendlich kostbarer ist, als alle Schätze von Wissenschaft, denen bey uns der unzufriedene Gelehrte, und oft mit so vergebener Mühe nachstrebet."

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 97-98.

constitution. Such diet "could produce nothing but a raw body and a raw character of the soul."<sup>87</sup> Because hunting and gathering usually did not require any collaborative effort, Northern men felt no inclination to enter society and, as a result, had no ideas except the few their mind was capable of producing on its own. These, therefore, became all the more important and, with the help of an over-active imagination, gradually took the form of desires and passions. "Desires must have been their only law; the present alone must concern them".<sup>88</sup> Northern man, thus, was solitary; he had only a few needs which he sought to satisfy at all cost, even if this entailed conflict with other humans.

Raw, barbarian man ignores even in the most simple, the first, the most necessary condition into which he is placed by nature, almost all sentiments of humanity, of order and of justice.<sup>89</sup>

The sentiment of love did not transcend the level of a mere sexual impulse. The establishment of conjugal relations, therefore, could only be explained as the result of brute force; the physical subjection of women to men who were incapable of appreciating them as anything other than property. This also applied to their offspring: "He sells them according to his fancy; he used them for anything he considers useful."<sup>90</sup>

Like Rousseau, Iselin claimed that society was established by "some accidental occurrences" which forced small groups of men to share the same territory over a prolonged period of time.<sup>91</sup> Iselin furthermore suggested that, because Northern man could recognise others only in so far as they became

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 230.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 234: "Der rohe, der barbarische Mensch, misskennet auch in den einfältigsten, in den ersten, in den nothwendigsten Verhältnissen, in welche ihn die Natur gesetzt, fast alle Gefühle der Menschlichkeit, der Ordnung und der Gerechtigkeit."

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 235: "Sein Kind ist wie die Mutter desselben, sein Eigentum, sein Slave. Er verkauffet solches nach Gutbefinden, - er gebrauchet es zu welchem Dienste es ihm gefällt. Es muss nach seinem Wolgefallen leben, oder sterben."

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 239: "Wenn der rohe Mensch also geselliger und menschlicher Empfindungen fähig wird; so ist es dennoch lange nur gegen sein Geschlecht, oder höchstens gegen wenige Menschen, mit welchen ihn zufällige Ereignisse in eine nähere Verbindung setzen."



“part of himself”, such early societies formed minute, extremely tight-knit communities. Man “no longer distinguishes himself from others; everything that concerns them and is of matter to them will affect him immediately”.<sup>92</sup> According to Iselin, this also explained why Roman historians so often referred to the astonishing friendship and loyalty amongst barbarians. To them death became secondary to the maintaining of the community.

In his account of Northern, savage man, Iselin listed three further characteristics which, he believed, helped to explain why the model of barbarian unsociability did not lead to continuous cultural development but, rather ended in a state of general war between quasi-republican entities: their vanity, their ardent desire for independence and their inability to develop sociability beyond the confinements of their family or clan which, Iselin claimed, explained the origin of a “barbarian law of nations” [*Völkerrecht*].

For Northern men, society could never serve any other purpose but to lend them more physical strength for the satisfaction of their needs. Hence, early barbarian societies resembled savage hunting parties; they were of only temporary duration and usually dissolved as soon as the basic needs had been satisfied.<sup>93</sup> For a long time, the association of two or more different societies remained impossible.

He does not owe anything to whoever does not belong to this group. He does not recognise his rights or property. He is allowed to rob him of everything. The words of stranger and enemy have the same meaning.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>93</sup> See also, *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 37: “In rohem Gegenden fangen die Menschen sehr spät an, durch so viele Bedürfnisse von einander abzuhängen. Es brauchet da eine lange Zeit, bis sie über die natürliche Nothdurft etwas verlangen. Sie finden nicht so bald besondere Reize in dem gesellschaftlichen Umgange. Wenn schon ein plötzliche Noth, sie vereinigt, so trennet ihre rohe Gemüthsart sie wieder von einander, so bald die Gefahr vorbei ist, welche sie genöthiget hat, sich gemeinsamen Wesen zu unterwerfen. Die Familien bleiben also in einer vollkommenen Unabhängigkeit. [...] Daher schränken sich fast alle politischen Verfassungen der nordischen Völker auf das Kriegswesen ein.”

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 247: “Ein Volk macht denn ein kleines Häufgen aus, welches Furcht oder Raubbegierde, oder ein unbestimmter Trieb, und oft nur für eine kurze Zeit verbinden. Ueber die engen Schranken einer solchen Vereinigung dehnen sich die geselligen Gefühle des Wilden nicht leicht aus. Wer nicht von diesem Häufgen ist,

The latent hostility between different clans was increased through the barbarian’s natural vanity which Iselin described as a socialised form of the desire for domination. The decoration of their bodies and clothes with an array of different objects, such as the feathers, bones, teeth and the skins of animals, the participation in games and musical activities all served exclusively for the purpose of establishing domination within the group by non-violent means.<sup>95</sup> However, when vanity acquired a collective form it directly encouraged conflict between different groups. For Iselin, the barbarians’ much vaunted “love of liberty” was thus little else but licentiousness, an unbridled passion to follow one’s desires without interference.

The dislike for regulations, the inability to follow orders and decrees; should this deserve the honourable name [of liberty]? Should they be worthy of the admiration of reasonable men? Should they make the condition of a savage more enviable than that of the lowliest of slaves? [...] This much praised liberty of unpolished man is thus a real chimera. Before reason makes him capable of freedom, the barbarian is, in both in the natural and moral sense of the word, a natural slave. To subject and to be subjected; this is the entire history of the state of savageness.<sup>96</sup>

The task of the barbaric state, Iselin believed, was thus limited to the organisation of warfare and the common defence of independence.<sup>97</sup> Barbaric civil society resembled “armed brotherhoods”, more than proper states.<sup>98</sup> The

dem ist er nichts schuldig. Er erkennet bey diesem kein Recht und kein Eigenthum. Er darf alles rauben. Die Wörter Fremdling und Feind haben bey ihm die gleiche Bedeutung.”

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285-293.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319-320: “Die Unbändigkeit, die Unfähigkeit, Befehlen und Verordnungen nachzuleben, sollte diese einen so verehrungswürdigen Namen verdienen? Sollte diese der Bewunderung und der Hochachtung der Vernünftigen würdig seyn? Sollten sie die Wildheit dem letzten Sklaven beneidungswürdig machen?” See also p. 322-323: “Diese gepriesene Freyheit des unpolicierten Menschen ist also eine wahre Chimäre. Der Barbar ist in dem natürlichen Verstande wie im moralischen, ehe ihn die Vernunft der Freyheit fähig machet, von Natur ein Slave. Unterdrücken und unterdrückt werden; dieses ist die ganze Geschichte des Standes der Wildheit.”

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 38.

<sup>98</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 126: “Die Verfassung selbst muss, noch lange unbestimmt, ungewiss und verworren, sich einzig auf kriegerische Absichten einschränken. So sind ungefahr die Staaten der Tartaren zu allen Zeiten beschaffen gewesen. So war es die

stabilisation of such loose associations could only have been accomplished through a mixture of religion, education and a politics which sought continuously to engage the community in external war. Furthermore, because amongst savages authority could not be established by brute force alone, political constitutions in the North were egalitarian and based on communal property. This allowed barbarians to be a member of a larger entity without having to renounce the desire for being a master.

Culture, Iselin concluded, was able to develop only when the people from the North clashed with those from the South and East. The transfer of information was thereby beneficial to both parties. What the Oriental model of sociability lacked could be made good by the unsociability of the North, and *vice versa*. Barbarians, for example, had a developed instinct for competition and love of fatherland, but their minds could not produce abstract ideas and remained insensitive to the intellectual charms of real beauty and order. They were immured in a tightly sealed, violent universe that did not extend beyond their tribe and was devoid of any higher notion of humanity.<sup>99</sup>

The closer a unity these constitutions managed to create between the citizens of a state; the more estranged they became to the rest of mankind. [...] The stronger the love of civil society and the love of the fatherland grew in men whose minds remained uncultivated, the less a general love of mankind was able to develop in their hearts.<sup>100</sup>

Vereinigung der alten Germanier und anderer celtischer Völker, die ebenfalls mehr in einer weitläufigen kriegerischen Brüderschaft als in bürgerlichen Gesellschaften lebten."

<sup>99</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 67: "Wie enger indessen diese Stiftungen die Einigkeit zwischen den Bürgern eines Staates knüpften; desto mehr entfremdeten sie dieselben von andern Menschen. [...] Wie starker also die bürgerliche Liebe, und die Liebe des Vaterlandes bey Menschen wurden, derer Seelen noch zierlich unangebaut waren; desto weniger konnte sich die allgemeine Menschen-Liebe in ihren Herzen ausbreiten."

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67: "Wie enger indessen diese Stiftungen die Einigkeit zwischen Bürgern eines Staates knüpften; desto mehr entfremdeten sie dieselben von andern Menschen. [...] Wie stärker also die bürgerliche Liebe, und die Liebe des Vaterlandes bey Menschen wurden deren Seelen noch ziemlich unangebaut waren; desto weniger konnte sich die allgemeine Menschen-Liebe in ihren Herzen ausbreiten."

A more general idea of humanity could enter the mind of the barbaric hunter-gatherer only through communication with men who had grown up in milder climates. The agrarian, trading people from the Orient, meanwhile, had a developed sense of beauty and order but lacked the competitive spirit of the barbarians and their dedication to the common good and liberty.

### 5. The rise of modern liberty in the West

The central question for Iselin was how the various characteristics of these two diametrically opposed types of society could be united, so that the particular and the general, the master and the slave, discipline and enlightenment, the love of fatherland and the love of order could fuse as a new entity. Iselin believed that the answer could be found in the history of the European monarchies. In Book Seven, he had tried to show how the rise and fall of the ancient Greek city states and of the Roman republic could be explained as the result of an initially successful but ultimately failed attempt to forge a durable link between the principles of sociability and unsociability.<sup>101</sup> Iselin admitted that it was not evident why Europe should succeed where the great civilisations of Antiquity had failed.

Initially, Western Europe seemed even less promising than Greece and Rome. When the invading barbarian hordes destroyed Roman civilisation and set up a feudal constitution, Europe, Iselin argued, found itself reduced to a level worse than either despotism or barbarism.<sup>102</sup> For while the barbarians of the German forests were still driven by their love of fatherland and, through their constitution, had managed to channel their naturally violent

<sup>101</sup> For an account of Iselin's narrative of ancient Greece and Rome, see Ulrich Im Hof, *Isaak Iselin und die Spätaufklärung*, p. 77-83; also Andreas Urs Sommer, *Geschichte als Trost. Isaak Iselins Geschichtsphilosophie*, p. 89-97.

<sup>102</sup> See for example, *Ueber die Geschichte der Menschheit*, Zürich 1770, vol. 2, p. 109: "Der Despotismus war die einzige gute Regierungsform in Zeiten und bey Völkern, wo fast nur einer, oder doch nur wenige tugendhaft und erleuchtet seyn konnten. Welch ein Unterschied zwischen dem glücklichen Zustande der grossen morgenländischen Reiche in ihren Anfängen, und den unseligen Unordnungen der grossen europäischen Monarchien in den mittleren Zeiten. Wie unglücklich waren nicht die Bürger dieser wilden Verfassungen gegen den ruhigen Sklaven des Despoten."

dispositions into directions that served the common good, the same barbarians, once they became vassals and lived dispersed across the Roman provinces turned into solitary, if petty, tyrants. In the absence of agriculture, commerce and learning, which could have helped to introduce more refined notions of order and humanity, early medieval Europe became impenetrable to the forces of enlightenment. Furthermore, because the barbarian nobles had only few needs and incessant feuds prevented the revival of agriculture and trade, there was virtually no basis left on which sociability could have developed as a counter to the deeply dehumanising effects of feudal law. As a result, Iselin argued, Europe's constitutions increased the barbarism of its population even further, generating a downward spiral of mutual corruption until the European monarchies had fallen to a state of continuous civil war.

According to Iselin, modern Europe was still strongly marked by its barbaric past. "In most European states, the common people is still almost as barbaric, as superstitious, as raw, as ignorant, as unjust as it had been in medieval times."<sup>103</sup> The same applied to the nobles. Their obsession with decoration, games, hunting, music and dance revealed them to be little more than well-dressed savages who had exchanged the "manly barbarism of their ancestors" with "the female excesses of the state of barbarism".<sup>104</sup> Modern "gallantry" was therefore "nothing but a return to the state of savageness".<sup>105</sup> Universities and schools of divinity were still largely steeped in superstitious darkness.<sup>106</sup> Europe's late barbarism, finally, was also reflected in principles of underlying the modern law of nations which had effectively legalised a purely personal politics of ambition:

A barbaric law of nations lent it an appearance of justice; it provided it with an endless source of arguments which the selfish ministers and those in power could use in order to convince the people that it was in their best interest to be made miserable and unhappy.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 393; see also *ibid.*, p. 130-131: "Das ganze Europa disseits der Alpen ist also bis in das sechzehnte Jahrhundert bey dem äusserlichen Scheine des gesitteten Standes in eine beynahe durchgehende Barbarey versunken geblieben."

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 395.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 399.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 407-408.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 415: "Ein barbarisches Völkerrecht hat demselben den Schein der Gerech-

Yet, Iselin believed that the European monarchies stood a much better chance of realising real freedom than any previous form of state recorded in history. More specifically, Iselin predicted that it was from the English type of a republican, commercial monarchy that freedom was most likely to emerge. By letting the *History of Mankind* culminate in a cautious appraisal of the republican monarchy of England, instead of the post-feudal French monarchy, Iselin openly took position within an ongoing European debate about the respective advantages and disadvantages of English liberty and French Absolutism for the establishment of a successful regime of commercial politics.

The reason why he placed his bet on England, Iselin explained, was not because it had already achieved a state of real freedom. Rather, he did so, because he believed that the English constitution provided the conditions in which commerce and agriculture could best contribute to the spread of humanity and sociability. In France, he claimed, where the prerogatives of the nobility had been maintained, commerce had only softened but not overcome the barbaric elements within French society.<sup>108</sup> For these reasons, Iselin predicted, England would also turn out to be the more stable regime of the two, and better equipped for coping with the strains that a modern economy put on politics.

Iselin had no intention to downplay the achievements of the French monarchy. Even in France, citizens were protected by the laws, and behaved no longer as savages but as polite and civilised people. Iselin's point was that

tigkeit gegeben, und unerschöpfliche Quellen von Fürwänden eröffnet, unter welchen der Eigennutzen der Grossen und der Minister, die Völker überredet, dass man sie zu ihrem Besten, elend und unglücklich mache."

<sup>108</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 325-326: "Pracht, Ueppigkeit und Ausgelassenheit [...] führten eine Ausgelassenheit mit sich, welche desto grosser war, je weniger die Gemüther zu einem bescheidenen Genusse des Ueberflusses vorbereitet seyn konnten. Daher neigten sich die Grossen und die Reichen dieser Länder noch starker zur Unterdrückung, und die, welche sich erst emporschwingen wollten, zur Niederträchtigkeit. Wie die Regierungsform und die Sitten da einen gemeinnützigen Gebrauch der Reichthümer nur nicht gedenken liessen, so schränkten sich alle Empfindungen der Grossen wie der Kleinen nur auf dieselben ein; und so wurden alle Begierden desto heftiger und desto verheerender, je enger sie eingeschlossen waren."



in Europe and, in particular, on the Continent, peace and justice had almost entirely been brought about by the forces of unsociability. Here, civilisation was the product of external constraint, both politically and socially, not of moral enlightenment. At the end of Book Seven, Iselin argued that there existed "two fundamentally different forms of policing, or of generating softer moeurs". One was external, the other internal.

The first is the one which gives society its external form. It organises kings, judges, authority. It is often the work of mediocre wisdom and overwhelming force. It forces men into order; however, it is incapable of making them love and respect it. The other one improves the minds and hearts. It is the work of the highest reason and, therefore, requires much more time. The first one has usually been established for a long period of time before the other begins to emerge.<sup>109</sup>

According to Iselin, Europe's monarchies had so far managed only to discipline men, not to enlighten them. Through the establishment of checks and balances; the separation of the executive from the legislative and judicial, they had managed to reduce some of the arbitrary element of barbarism. Moreover, through the introduction of codes of conduct (such as the ones defining the honourable conduct of medieval knights), politeness and civility, monarchies had made men more malleable and controllable.

The crucial point, Iselin argued, was to realise that for monarchies to establish real freedom, their citizens had to be disciplined *and* virtuous. Even good constitutions could never compensate for lack of virtue.

Establishing the balance between the estates and the citizens might be of utmost importance to a perfect constitution; however, if wisdom, virtue and good morals are missing, true freedom becomes impossible. The latter can be achieved only through the rule of law *and* [the rule] of the general principle of the common good. Without

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 231: "Die eine ist diejenige, durch welche der Gesellschaft die äusserliche Gestalt gegeben wird. Diese ordnet Könige, Richter, Obrigkeiten. Sie ist oft das Werk einer mittelmässigen Weisheit und einer überwiegenden Gewalt. Sie zwinget die Menschen zur Ordnung; aber sie machet sie nicht fähig, dieselben zu lieben und zu schätzen. Die andre verbessert die Geister und die Gemüther. Sie ist das Werk der erhabensten Vernunft, und sie fordert deshalb unendlich mehr Zeit und mehr Mühe. Die erstere ist insgemein schon lange festgesetzt, wenn die andre noch gar wenig ausgebreitet ist. Die erstere wird durch Gewalt und durch Ansehen erzielt; die andre durch Wohlthätigkeit und durch Erleuchtung. Jene ist sehr leicht zu Stande zu bringen, diese sehr schwer."

a general enlightenment of minds, without a softening of characters, [true freedom] cannot persist. Without these great and rare advantages only a false, deceptive form of freedom can exist; a condition, that in most cases is as bad as complete servitude. That nation is in danger where the constitution is unfortunate enough to cause the destruction of virtue and merit and the disappearance of taste and sentiment; and there is more than one country in Europe to which this applies.<sup>110</sup>

### 5.1. Iselin's critique of Montesquieu's model of a non-virtuous monarchy

Iselin's insistence on the importance of virtue for the preservation of monarchies was an easily recognisable attack on Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois* and what he took to be the latter's overly deterministic and sceptical model of a modern monarchy.<sup>111</sup> Already in the *Patriotic Dreams of a Friend of Mankind* of 1755 he had attacked Montesquieu on the grounds that his theory of the various forms of government not only sidelined republican politics but, generally, offered little hope for a morally more rewarding future. Montesquieu, he claimed, had presented the principles of despotic, re-

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 315-316: "Das Gleichgewicht der Stände und der Bürger ist zwar für die Vollkommenheit der Verfassung höchst wichtig; aber wenn Weisheit, Tugend und Sitten dabey mangeln; so ist die wahre Freyheit unmöglich. Diese ist die Herrschaft der Gesetze und des grossen Grundtriebes der allgemeinen Wohlfahrt. Ohne eine grosse Erleuchtung der Geister, ohne eine besondre Milderung der Gemüther, kann diese nicht bestehen. Ohne diese grossen und seltenen Vorzüge hat nur eine falsche, eine betrügliche Freyheit statt; ein unseliger Zustand, der meistens so schlimm ist, als die unumschränkste Dienstbarkeit. Wehe dem Lande, dessen Verfassung die Tugend und die Verdienste zernichten, und den Geschmack und die Empfindung derselben zu erlöschen, unglücklich genug seyn sollte; und es gibt in Europa mehr als ein Land, das in diesem Falle ist." See also *ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>111</sup> There does not exist any recent study of the Swiss reception of Montesquieu. For Germany, see Rudolf Vierhaus, "Montesquieu in Deutschland. Zur Geschichte seiner Wirkung als politischer Schriftsteller im 18. Jahrhundert" in Rudolf Vierhaus, *Deutschland im 18. Jahrhundert. Politische Verfassung, soziales Gefüge, geistige Bewegungen*, Göttingen 1987, p. 9-32; more recently, Frank Herdmann, *Montesquieurezeption in Deutschland im 18. und beginnenden 19. Jahrhundert*, Hildesheim, Zürich, New York 1990. For the Dutch reception, see Wyger R. E. Vellema, "Republican Readings of Montesquieu: The Spirit of the Laws in the Dutch Republic" in *History of Political Thought*, 18 (1997), p. 43-63.

publican and monarchical states as if they were fixed, irreversible laws that permitted no alteration. His theory of climate appeared to make nonsense of the idea of human volition. Societies were natural, predictable wholes, created by automatic human responses to climate and topography.<sup>112</sup> Iselin was particularly opposed to Montesquieu's Mandevillean claim that monarchies could be maintained solely on the basis of the rule of law and "false honour", a purely reflexive response of naturally selfish beings to preferences and distinctions. Honour, Montesquieu had argued in Chapter Seven of Book Three, "makes all parts of the body politic move; its actions binds them, and each person works for the common good, believing he works for his individual interest." From the perspective of common utility, honour was as effective as virtue.<sup>113</sup>

While Iselin accepted that Montesquieu's classification "is correct, in so far as it reflects political experience", he insisted that it failed to convey adequately nature's plan for man which was to live in societies based on love.

Whether the nature of society necessarily requires it to be animated and preserved by one of these springs, whether nature had not wanted to promote the happiness of its favourite beings and to make them follow her simple and motherly intentions through more simple and worthy springs is a question which, it seems to me, deserves asking. I do not believe that the wise and kind creator of all beings made men as bad as we imagine them to be and as we find them in the civil societies we live in. We are born to make us mutually happy, and the instinct for our own well-being is intimately linked to the instinct of wanting to make our neighbours happy.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>112</sup> See Judith Shklar, *Montesquieu*, Oxford 1987, p. 67-110.

<sup>113</sup> Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, Anne M. Cohler et al. (eds.), Cambridge 1989, p. 27. See also Montesquieu's striking apology of luxury in Letter 106 of the *Persian Letters* (translated by C. Betts, London 1973). For a recent interpretation of Montesquieu's theory of honour, see Sharon R. Krause, *Liberalism with Honor*, Cambridge (Ma.) 2002, p. 32ff; see also Paul A. Rahe, "Forms of Government: Structure, Principle, Object, and Aim" in David W. Carrithers et al., *Montesquieu's Science of Politics. Essays on The Spirit of Laws*, Lanham etc. 2001, p. 69-108 (especially p. 77-80).

<sup>114</sup> *Philosophische und Patriotische Träume eines Menschenfreundes*, Zürich 1758, p. 64-65: "Ob aber das Wesen der menschlichen Gesellschaft es nothwendig mit sich bringe, dass sie durch eine dieser Federn bewegt und erhalten werde, ob nicht die Natur durch einfachere und ihrer mehr würdige Triebkräfte die Glückseligkeit ihrer ersten Lieblinge befördern würde, wenn diese ihren einfältigen und mütterlichen Absichten folgen wollten, ist bey mir eine Frage, die ohne Ungereimtheit

Iselin repeated his critique in the *Versuch über die Gesetzgebung*, of 1759, which earned him the accusation, by several of his friends, of having completely misunderstood the aim of the *Esprit des Lois*. In a letter, dated 29 May 1759, Daniel Fellenberg wrote:

Are you not making the same accusations against Montesquieu that are commonly being made against Machiavelli? I don't believe this superior man wanted to teach us how things should be but that he wanted merely to develop the causes of what exists; he explained the moral world as physicists explain the physical world.<sup>115</sup>

From Iselin's point of view, however, it was rather his critics who had failed to notice the strongly Mandevillean undertones in Montesquieu's work. We can see this from a reply to his friend Salomon Hirzel:

I am happy to admit that this beautiful work is nothing but a collection of political observations. However, it is a collection of poison which is all the more deadly due to the dangerous inductions or general principles that are being drawn from it [...]. Nor has the author warned us sufficiently which, I believe, should be seen as an essential duty of any virtue loving thinker. He speaks of everything with complete indifference, as if virtue and truth differed from vice and error only by name. Everything moral is being transformed into a kind of mechanism. [...] These observations would have required H.[erm] v. M.[ontesquieu] to be particularly cautious, especially because everything in his work has the appearance of being tightly and

aufgeworfen werden kann. Ich halte davor, dass der weise und gütige Urheber aller Wesen die Menschen nicht so schlimm geschaffen, als wir sie uns vorstellen, und als wir sie in bürgerlichen Gesellschaften finden, darinnen wir mit einander leben. Wir sind gebohren uns gemeinschaftlich glücklich zu machen, und der Trieb zu unserm Wolseyn ist mit dem zu unsers Nächsten seinem auf das genaueste verschwistert."

<sup>115</sup> Letter from Fellenberg to Iselin (29 May 1759): "Vos sentimens sur l'Esprit des Loix, et surtout sur les trois principes de gouvernement, qu'il établit, n'étoient pas un secret pour moi. Je me rapelle que vous en parlez dans vos charmans essais. Je voudrois, Monsieur, que Vous preniez [word unclear] la peine d'ecrire un Essai sur cet ouvrage, et d'y developper les senitmens, que vous m'indiquez. Je vous avoue, Monsieur, que l'Esprit des Loix m'a paru depuis que je l'ai connu l'ouvrage le plus beau et le plus utile, qui ait été écrit par un homme. Ne faites vous pas de Montesquieu les reproches, qu'on a fait si souvent de Machiavel? Je ne crois pas, que cet homme superieur ait voulu nous enseigner ce qui doit être, mais il a voulu nous developper les causes de qui est, il a expliqué le monde moral comme les Physiciens nous expliquent le monde physique. Le seul reproche que je fais à Montesquieu c'est d'avoir négligé souvent les monumens certains de l'histoire, pour ne consulter que son genie." Berner Burgerbibliothek, Fellenberg-Archiv, Schachtel 152.

completely connected into a single whole which lends it an appeal that bewitches man's mind and heart and takes away any desire and courage to subject [his ideas] to close examination.<sup>116</sup>

The importance Iselin attached to try and break open Montesquieu's deterministic model of commercial monarchy can be gathered from a short article from the 1778 volume of the *Ephemeriden der Menschheit* where he published a letter from Henry Home, Lord Kames to Fellenberg which, he claimed, had greatly influenced the *History of Mankind*.<sup>117</sup> In the letter, dated 10 May 1763, Kames, Iselin reports, encouraged the members of the *Patriotic Society* to enquire "whether Montesquieu has described the nations more accurately and dissected their principles more correctly than Rousseau [the] individual man; or whether they both, instead of providing us with true images, simply offered us nothing but creations of their fantasy."<sup>118</sup> In his letter, of which Iselin only gives a German translation, Kames wrote:

[Montesquieu] has dealt with all the effects that derive from the nature of government, from the difference of climate, the strength and weakness of a people, servitude, etc. However, he did not develop the effects that derive from human nature itself, from our passions and from the natural springs of our actions; You will certainly feel, my friend, that human nature itself has a much greater influence on the establishment of laws and manners than all the other causes which Montesquieu lists. Perhaps your society cannot make better use of its time than to add what, in this respect, is missing from the Spirit of the Laws.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>116</sup> Isaak Iselin to Salomon Hirzel (27 July 1759), Cited in Ulrich Im Hof, *Isaak Iselin*, vol. 2, p. 407.

<sup>117</sup> "Anekdote über die Geschichte der Menschheit aus dem elften Stücke der Ephemeriden der Menschheit von 1778", inserted into the 1784 edition of the *Geschichte der Menschheit*, xiii, note: "Allein ohne Lord Homs [sic] Schreiben würde doch wohl die Geschichte der Menschheit ganz etwas anders geworden seyn, als sie nun ist."

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.: "[E]r würde es für einen Undank halten, wenn der Welt verborgen hielte, dass Lord Home, durch einen an diese Gesellschaft geschriebenen Brief, ihn veranlasst habe seinen hauptsächlich der Prüfung der Rousseauschen Paradoxen, die damals ein so grosses Aufregen machten, bestimmten Entwurf, auch auf die Untersuchung zu richten, ob Montesquieu die Staaten getreuer geschildert und ihre Triebfedern richtiger zergliedert habe, als Herr Rousseau den einzelnen Menschen; oder ob beyde an statt wahrer Nachbilder uns nur die Geburten ihrer Phantasie dargestellt haben."

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., xiv. The original letter seems missing. The Fellenberg Archive contains two

Although it is unclear in what way, precisely, Kames' letter influenced Iselin's initial plan for the *History of Mankind*, there can be no doubt that Iselin considered Montesquieu as one of his main adversaries. Throughout the book he repeatedly turned against those thinkers who, he believed, explained the form of society solely with reference to climatic conditions.

Freedom is not the fruit of every climate, say two excellent men\* [\*J.J. Rousseau and Montesquieu]. I believe, it is more correct to say: Freedom is not the fruit of every period; not every people is ripe for it. Laws alone are not enough [in order to establish freedom].

His critical attitude towards Montesquieu would have been made even clearer had he changed the title of his book from the *History of Mankind* into *The Spirit of History*, as he intended in 1767, whilst preparing the second edition.<sup>120</sup>

original letters from Kames, dated 1 February 1763 and 20 April 1773 which, given the familiarity of tone, indicate that there must have been a more regular correspondence between Kames and Fellenberg. They also show how closely the Bernese believed their own project of establishing a science of legislation was related to the works of Kames, Millar, Smith and Robertson. In the second letter Kames for example writes: "The design is the History of Man; but as that is too extensive for a single hand, I select parts such as please me the most. I give my work the following title Sketches of the History of Man. One Sketch in particular comprehends Morality. In the first Section are laid down its principles; and in the second it's progress from infancy among savages to maturity among enlightened nations. If this task be well executed, of which I am not the proper Judge, it will in part fulfil the views of your moral society. Millar is a man of genius. The purpose of his book, which is to connect law and history, is not yet so common as it ought to be. The second Edition is enlarged, and probably will relish with you more." "Dr. Smith's friends are like you solicitous for a publication. For sometime past he has been employ'd in building and demolishing; and I am afraid the delicacy of his taste exceeds his powers of execution, so that the delivery of his Child may be yet at a distance, tho the time of reckoning is long past. Dr. Ferguson's Institutes is a careless trifle intended for his scholars and never meant to wonder out of that circle." Kames concludes the letter with a "Remark that literature has in Britain been for sometime in motion, and now seems to be settled in Scotland. There is scarce a vestige of it left in England."

<sup>120</sup> In a letter to Samuel Hirzel, of 31 March 1767, Iselin wrote: "Es ist mir heute eingefallen, ob ich diesem Werke nicht den Titel geben könnte, von dem Geiste der Geschichte [...]. Mir deucht, der von dem Geiste der Geschichte würde nicht

### 5.2. *The rise of real freedom in England*

According to Iselin, the idea that freedom was the fruit of a long and violent interaction between constraint and cultivation of the soul was vindicated in the example of England. England was, "of all the nation on this earth", the only one where "freedom presents itself in a considerable glory."<sup>121</sup> What made the case of England so valuable to his overall argument, Iselin claimed, was that, unlike in the rest of Europe, in England good laws had been introduced long before its inhabitants began cultivating the virtues.

Earlier than in all other empires of the North, fortunate Albion abolished slavery; every inhabitant had his human rights restored, and every citizen had the advantages of his particular rank secured.<sup>122</sup>

This meant that any cultural progress that had occurred in England could be attributed neither to the influence of climatic or topographical specificities, nor to any forms of external discipline. The history of English liberty, accordingly, was the history of man's self-education; it showed what the human mind was capable of once it had been freed from the constraints of barbaric legislation.

Iselin's highly schematic history of British freedom, for which he mainly relied on Hume's *History of England*, follows four steps.<sup>123</sup> The first step

übel stehen und die Absicht und den Inhalt des Werkgens deutlicher ausdrücken." Cited in Ulrich Im Hof, *Isaak Iselin und die Spätaufklärung*, p. 90.

<sup>121</sup> *Über die Geschichte der Menschheit*, Zürich 1770, vol. 2, p. 337.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 337.

<sup>123</sup> The overall importance of Hume's *History of England* for Iselin's *History of Mankind* is being emphasised in Im Hof, *Isaak Iselin und die Spätaufklärung*, p. 85. See also Im Hof, *Isaak Iselin*, p. 483-84. In a letter to Hirzel (10 January 1763), Iselin praised the *History of England* as the best work of history to have been published so far: "[...] ein so schönes historisches Werk habe ich noch nicht gelesen. Weder von den Alten noch von den Neuen hat noch niemand die Geschichte so philosophisch behandelt. Da bleiben Voltairens und La Beaumellens Flittergold weit zurücke." Cited in *ibid.*, p. 484. See also *Über die Geschichte der Menschheit*, Zürich 1770, vol. 2, p. 255, where Iselin describes Hume as the greatest historian ever, "[e]in grosser Geschichtsschreiber, ein Mann, dem die Nachwelt vielleicht die erste Stelle unter den Geschichtsschreibern anweisen wird." For an excellent discussion of Hume's philosophical history of English liberty, see J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism*

towards freedom, he claimed, was achieved with the *Magna Carta*, "one of the most beautiful monuments to freedom".<sup>124</sup> While the *Magna Carta* remained more an ideal than an actual legal practice, Iselin believed that it had nevertheless spared England from the worst excesses of feudalism. More important for the improvement of morals and the overcoming of barbarism were the development of trade and rise in standards of living. "They gave the passions and inclinations new strength and gradually banned the rawness and savageness of the old moeurs." Commerce and the arts prompted the aristocracy to invest in conspicuous consumption, rather than in the maintaining of "large crowds of raw followers". Due to the gradual disappearance of the clans, large portions of common people were deprived of their source of income and had to turn to new occupations. According to Iselin, commerce and industry spread even further once the nobles had been granted the right to sell their fiefs. "This was how the valuable rights of liberty and property were secured; this was how agriculture and trade were encouraged; this was how the citizens became richer, more important and more perceptive to the advantages of freedom."<sup>125</sup> While diminishing the power-base of the nobility created greater freedom from barbarism, it also led to the concentration of royal authority, so that during the reigns of Queen Mary and Queen Elisabeth the English monarchs were more absolutist than any of their Continental counterparts. English liberty was close to extinction and could be reanimated only through a radical corrective in the form of a revolution:

a particular fermentation of the passions, an enthusiasm which shows itself only during great occasions, and a revolution which destroys all of men's ideas, which

*and Religion. Volume Two: Narratives of Government*, Cambridge 1999, p. 163-257. For a more general introduction to Hume's historical thought, see Nicholas Phillipson, *Hume*, London 1989.

<sup>124</sup> *Über die Geschichte der Menschheit*, Zürich 1770, vol. 2, p. 337.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 342-343: "Die Erlaubnis, welche eine tiefe Politick dem Adel zu Veräusserung seiner Lehen ertheilte, trug nicht weniger bey, die ungeheure Uebermacht desselben zu schwächen; und den Bürger und den Landmann einer wahren Freyheit, und eines sichern Wolstandes theilhaft zu machen. So wurden die kostbaren Rechte der Freyheit und des Eigenthums festgesetzt; so wurden der Feldbau und die Handelschaft aufgemuntert; so wurde der bürgerliche Stand reicher, beträchtlicher, und für den Vorzug der Freyheit fühlbarer."



radically interrupts the usual flow of the human mind and which forces it into an entirely new direction.<sup>126</sup>

This, Iselin claimed, was how “fanaticism contributed more than anything else to the establishing of real freedom in England.”<sup>127</sup> For the first time in its history the Parliament was no longer under the control of “Barbarians and hunters” but filled with learned fanatics and enthusiasts.<sup>128</sup> Having successfully brought together the republican enthusiasm for the common-wealth with the rule of law one more step was needed for freedom to become a reality. Men had to gain a correct knowledge of the laws that governed the universe and they had to acquire a clear understanding of the working of the human mind. The first, Iselin claimed, was achieved thanks to Newton, the second to Bacon, Locke and Shaftesbury. It was after having gone through this violent process that England had achieved “a degree of freedom like, perhaps, no other people know on this planet”.<sup>129</sup>

Despite his eulogy of English liberty, Iselin was not interested in seeing the implementation of England’s constitutional principles in other European nations. Following the English model first and foremost meant that he rejected both a republican model *and* the traditional French concept of monarchy, supported by Montesquieu, in which the aristocracy played a crucial part.<sup>130</sup>

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 345: “Es braucht hierzu meistens eine besondere Gährung der Leidenschaften, einen Enthusiasmus, der sich nur bey grossen Anlässen äussert, und eine Erschütterung, die alle Begriffe der Menschen zerrüttet, den gewohnten Lauf derselben gänzlich unterbricht, und demselben eine vollkommen neue Richtung giebt. Ohne eine solche glückliche Revolution bleiben die durch die Gewohnheit geheiligten Misbräuche unverletzlich und unzerstörbar.”

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 345.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 347.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 347-348: “Erst aus diesen fürchterlichen Finsternissen brach die liebliche Freyheit, wie ein heiterer Himmel nach einem verheerenden Ungewitter, hervor. Eine Freyheit, die vielleicht vorher keinem Volke auf Erden bekannt gewesen war.”

<sup>130</sup> For a discussion of Montesquieu’s analysis of English liberty, see Sharon Krause, “The Spirit of Separate Powers in Montesquieu”, in *The Review of Politics*, 62 (2000), p. 231-265; Paul A. Rahe, “Forms of Government: Structure, Principle, Object, and Aim”, in David Carrithers et al. (eds.), *Montesquieu’s Science of Politics. Essays on The Spirit of Laws*, Lanham etc. 2001, p. 69-108; also C.P. Courtney, “Montesquieu and English Liberty” in *ibid.*, p. 273-290.

What Iselin argued for was a republican monarchy – but one which did not accept every detail of English politics and, especially, not its policy in world trade. What made England so appealing for thinking about the notion of a republican monarchy was above all the absence of a French type aristocracy which, for Iselin, represented the corrupting element of barbarism.

Although from a republican point of view England looked like a republican monarchy, it could also be seen as a monarchical republic – which is what is now commonly associated with the idea of a ‘modern republic’. In that sense, the English experience provided the blueprint for a revolution which produced a modern republic.

Having said that, one has to be careful about the meaning of the term ‘revolution’ in Book Eight of the *History of Mankind*. It is tempting to see Iselin as both a prophet and an advocate of revolution, not just because of the common characterisation of *Histories of Mankind* as inherently ‘revolutionary’ but also because of Iselin’s repeatedly expressed claim that only a revolution could administer the kind of radical corrective needed for existing European nations to realise freedom. In his private correspondence, Iselin spoke, again and again, of the “absolute necessity” of a revolution, of a “complete refounding” of society, of a “fortunate fermentation”, of a “necessary fever”, and of “cleansing tempests” that would finally liberate mankind.<sup>131</sup> Iselin was also the first to publish a German translation of the American Declaration of Independence. Moreover, his protégé, Peter Ochs, became a crucial figure in the Helvetic Revolution and a leading spokesman for a unitary state model.<sup>132</sup> Ochs, for example, explicitly referred to Iselin in defence of his claim that the reform of the Swiss Confederation had only been made possible through forced foreign intervention. From this perspective, the rearrangement of Swiss politics under Napoleon was simply the historical answer to Iselin’s long felt exasperation with the Swiss republics’ inability to reform.<sup>133</sup> The fact that the Austrian authorities felt sufficiently

<sup>131</sup> See Ulrich Im Hof, *Isaak Iselin und die Spätaufklärung*, p. 131.

<sup>132</sup> See Gustav Steiner, “Der Einfluss Isaak Iselins auf Peter Ochs” in *Basler Jahrbuch 1921*, Basel 1921, p. 64-119.

<sup>133</sup> See Peter Ochs, *Geschichte der Stadt und Landschaft Basel*, vol. 8, Basel 1822, p. 229-230 (note 1), where he cites a letter from Iselin to Frey (14 April 1770): “[...] selon moi, les sujets de leurs Excellences de tous les Cantons ne seront

threatened by the *History of Mankind* to put it on the Index seems to confirm that Iselin's book was indeed more incendiary than some Iselin scholars, like Ulrich Im Hof, have been willing to concede. However, a careful study of Iselin's work effectively rules out any such interpretation. Iselin's emphasis in the *History of Mankind* was clearly on change and not on violence. The aim of the book was to give guidance to such radical reforms, not to call for the change of politics by means of force.

It was this emphasis on the necessity for (and possibility of) change which contemporary readers saw as one of the distinguishing features of Iselin's *History of Mankind*. What it offered was the "perspective" of a future state, located beyond the present crisis. In his review, published in the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, Mendelssohn wrote: "Rarely have we seen so many noble ideas, so many pleasing perspectives and so many learned annotations in a book of such a small size." What Fontenelle had achieved for the understanding of the cosmos, Iselin had achieved for the understanding of the "revolution of peoples". Iselin's book, he claimed, showed "the important truth [...] that every development of [man's] capacities lead to the improvement of the human condition and that every restriction prompted a deterioration of the latter."<sup>134</sup> The *History of Mankind*, if Mendelssohn is to be believed, was what reform thinkers had been waiting for a long time to arrive: a science of legislation which was historical *and* philosophical at the same time. A science of legislation, moreover, which presented mankind with the image of a different future from that predicted by Rousseau.

heureux, que lorsque quelque voisin puissant voudra bien leur faire la grace de les conquérir." The same letter is quoted by another major figure of the Helvetik, Heinrich Zschokke; see *Die klassischen Stellen der Schweiz und ihre Hauptorte*, Karlsruhe und Leipzig 1842, p. 212.

<sup>134</sup> *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 4 (1767), p. 233-234: "Wir haben selten in einem Werke von so kleinem Umfange so viel lehrreiche Anmerkungen angetroffen. Philosophie und Kenntniss der Geschichte zeigen sich hier in ihrem Triumphe." See also p. 238 "Er gewinnt uns nach und nach den Beyfall für die wichtige Wahrheit ab, dass jede Entwicklung der Fähigkeiten eine Verbesserung, so wie jede Einschränkung derselben eine Verschlimmerung des menschlichen Zustandes sey."

## Conclusion

This study of Iselin's *History of Mankind* and Rousseau's second *Discourse* against the background of eighteenth-century Swiss republican reform discourse raises a number of important questions. First of all, it raises questions about Rousseau himself and the position he is said to occupy within both the Swiss and European Enlightenment. For too long, Rousseau has been portrayed as a typical Swiss republican. This view clearly needs revising. Rousseau was neither typically Swiss, nor was he in any way a typical republican. Strictly speaking, Rousseau's hometown Geneva was not even a member of the Swiss Federation but an associate member. It was a commercial city republic with virtually no hinterland. This meant that many of the issues that were central to the reform discourse of places like Berne, Basel or Zurich, like the encouragement of agriculture, the establishing of a new economic balance between the city and the subject territory, the dispute over commercial versus military aristocracy, or the role of foreign regiments were of relatively minor importance to Genevan reformers. Unlike Berne, moreover, Geneva did not have a strong military culture, nor were its magistrates proprietors of large estates where they spent their summer months, but often financiers who made their fortunes from their investments in French annuities. It was this dependence on the fate of the French public debt and the speculative frenzy which gripped even the lower echelons of society that was invariably noticed and discussed by foreign visitors, much more than Geneva's republicanism. We can see this from a remark made in 1788 by the Göttingen professor of history, Christoph Meiners: "No other city of this size has speculated more in French funds and has profited so greatly as Geneva; also no other [city] runs such high a risk of being ruined by an eventual French bankruptcy. It is literally true that the well-being of Geneva is inseparably linked to the well-being of France or, more exactly,