Michael Sonenscher (King’s College, Cambridge)

István Hont (1947 – 2013)

First published in Economies et sociétés, série PE (Histoire de la pensée économique).

Many of the things that historians of political and economic thought now think about these two subjects were first thought of by Istvan Hont. Although the point applies particularly to the period bounded by the works of Thomas Hobbes on the one side and by Karl Marx on the other, it also applies simply to thinking about politics as such. This is not only because Hont was a powerful and imaginative thinker but also because he was an unusually gifted historian. He found things – a text, a concept, a turn of phrase - that had long been forgotten (like, for example, the idea of a negative community of goods) or whose meaning had become garbled or ossified (like the concept of nationalism) and had the ability to explain what he had found with a depth and precision that could transform huge swathes of the history and historiography of political and economic thought. In this sense, his choice of David Hume’s phrase “jealousy of trade” as the title of his own book was an apt illustration of both the ability and the subject matter to which it had been applied. It was a phrase that indicated that something more than doux commerce, power politics or the birth of a consumer society were at stake when, as Hume also put it, trade became a reason of state. And, since it referred to both the normal and the pathological, it also helped to suggest that the interesting historical and analytical questions had to begin with both – meaning, in this case, with

---

1 Thanks to Béla Kapossy, John Robertson and, particularly, Isaac Nakhimovsky for helpful comments on earlier drafts.
2 The idea of a “negative community of goods” appeared in a paper entitled “Negative Community: The Natural Law Heritage from Pufendorf to Marx”, which was one of a series that Hont presented under the auspices of John M. Olin Program in the History of Political Culture at the University of Chicago in 1989. It was preceded by an earlier paper, written in 1984, on “The Concept of ‘Negative Community’ and the Origins of Historical Materialism.” Plans exist to publish several of Hont’s many unpublished papers, together with the text of his 2009 Carlyle lectures on Smith and Rousseau at Oxford University. His examination of nationalism was published originally as “The Permanent Crisis of a Divided Mankind: ‘Contemporary Crisis of the Nation State in Historical Perspective” in John Dunn (ed.), The Contemporary Crisis of the Nation State (Oxford, Blackwell, 1994) and then in Istvan Hont, Jealousy of Trade. International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective (Cambridge, Mass. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005): 447-528. Future references to Jealousy of Trade will appear as JT, followed by page numbers.
both the reciprocal and competitive sides of trade. In addition, since Hume’s retrospective assessment was written in the middle of the eighteenth century, the choice of title also pointed towards a range of further questions about established characterisations of historical periods and historical turning points. A generation ago, the idea that the thought of Adam Smith was best approached through the works of Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes and Samuel Pufendorf was more likely to be seen as a form of refined antiquarianism than as a real indication of the provenance and content of the range of moral and political questions underlying the Wealth of Nations, despite the fact that the line of intellectual descent from Grotius to Smith had been traced quite clearly over two hundred years ago by Smith’s first biographers, John Millar and Dugald Stewart. A generation ago too, the idea that the differences between the political economy of Physiocracy and the political economy of Adam Smith involved anything more than different evaluations of the relationship between agriculture and industry – rather than different visions of world peace – would have looked like eccentric speculation, not considered historical reconstruction.\(^4\) Both ideas now look self-evident, but it was Istvan Hont’s scholarship that made them look that way.

This blend of lateral historical thinking and acute analytical sensitivity was one of the most consistent features of Hont’s work. He was, for example, immensely pleased to discover that François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon, the author of the eighteenth century’s great paean to a just society, The Adventures of Telemachus, Son of Ulysses, was also the author of a poem entitled The Bees, not only because it pointed to the likelihood that Bernard Mandeville’s better-known Fable of the Bees was a reply to Fénelon, but also because, independently of any putative Mandeville-Fénelon dialogue, juxtaposing the content of the two poems helped to capture a great deal more of the fiercely competitive context of global war and political survival underlying the questions about morality, wealth and power that Mandeville’s poem addressed. This, as Hont went on to show, not only explained why the subject of luxury had as much to do with eighteenth-century theories of international

relations as with arguments in moral theory or speculation about political stability and social inequality, but also made it easier to see how Mandeville’s thought could be positioned within a broader analytical spectrum running from the strong endorsement of competitive trade made, for example, by the English admirer of Machiavelli, Charles Davenant, to the equally strong rejection of competitive trade by Fénelon and his followers. Broadening the analytical context in this way also had the further effect of clarifying the intellectual relationship between Mandeville and David Hume and, at the same time, of supplying the conceptual background to the opposition between what the French political economist Jean-François Melon was the first to call the “the spirit of commerce” and “the spirit of conquest” some three generations before the antithesis was revived by the Swiss political theorist Benjamin Constant. Thanks to Hont, it is now clear that almost all the great moral and political questions that emerged in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars were already alive a hundred years earlier, in the aftermath of the wars of the age of Louis XIV.

The mixture of the historical and the analytical informing everything that Hont wrote meant that the focus of his work fell less immediately or directly on the normative side of political thought than has been usual, at least in Anglophone circles, since the appearance of the works of John Rawls in the USA or after the revival of scholarly interest in civic humanism, civic republicanism or neo-Roman concepts of liberty in the work of J. G. A. Pocock, Quentin Skinner, Phillip Pettit and James Tully in Britain, the USA, Australia and Canada. On Hont’s terms, beginning with the normative amounted to beginning in midstream. Even the most apparently straightforward of normative claims (about, for example, self-preservation) could house clusters of concepts and usages whose significance would become apparent only in the light of careful historical research. In this sense, Hont was

---


6 An indication of Hont’s approach to the historiography of political thought can be found in an unpublished paper, given in Tokyo in 2005, on “The Cambridge Moment: Virtue, History and Public Philosophy”. It prefigured a series of seminars given with Duncan Kelly at the Cambridge University Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) in the Michaelmas Term of 2010 on the history and historiography of political thought.
a sceptic. This meant that none of the nouns or phrases used in teaching and text books found their way inadvertently into the things that he wrote. When they did - as for example with the concept of nationalism or the idea of the enlightenment - they were often deliberately presented in ways that were designed to counter the cumulative weight of received ideas. But, like the original subject of his doctoral research – a thesis on David Hume - Hont was also a mitigated sceptic. It was an intellectual disposition that fitted his early education as an engineer and, as his students and friends sometimes saw, piecing together an argument made up of a range of heterogeneous, but tightly integrated, historical components could be a cause of real aesthetic pleasure, just as reading the arguments of some of his less sceptical or talented peers could be a cause of real aesthetic dismay. One of his highest compliments was to say, when referring to a particular piece of writing, that its author was beginning to hear the music and, although his own musical tastes tended to provoke shock and awe rather than admiration, the tone of respect that accompanied the comment always made it clear that he was referring to work of an unusually high intellectual standard.

Hont’s reluctance to make normative assumptions was one of the reasons why, very early in his intellectual career, his historical attention was struck by the subject of sociability and, more specifically, by the vast body of largely religious and philosophical discussion to which that subject used to belong.7 The word itself, like its Latin forebear, socialitas, has now lost most of its earlier moral and theological connotations and has come to be used mainly descriptively to refer to different types of social interaction, as in the various types of sociability involved in public or private life, or in salons, masonic lodges, religious confraternities and workers’ associations, or among men and women in different locations, occupations, social settings or economic circumstances. In this sense, the modern concept of sociability has something in common with the old, unflattering, description of social history as history with the politics left out. In its earlier, seventeenth and eighteenth-century sense, however, the concept had rather more to do with the question of when - or why - the politics came in. This was the sense in which both the concept and the subject came

7 On sociability, see JT, 159-84.
to interest Hont. As he saw, sociability began to matter more when the idea of original sin began to matter less (he sometimes liked to say that the idea of original sin supplies a very robust foundation for politics). It did so too, however, because it also helped to open up an almost entirely unexplored historiographical terrain lying outside, or alongside, the strong conceptual polarities left over from the great philosophies of history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Here, instead of Gemeinschaft versus Gesellschaft, nature versus culture, feudalism versus capitalism, Enlightenment versus counter-Enlightenment, secularisation versus sacralisation, markets versus states – and all the other well-known ways of identifying the putative direction and content of historical change – was a richer and more highly differentiated array of approaches to what, in the last analysis, was still the same subject matter, namely human lives and what they are for. Here too, as Hont repeatedly showed, the space between philosophies of history on the one side and scripture on the other could be filled by recovering more of the huge and largely unexplored array of accounts of human needs, intelligence, emotions, sexuality, imagination, language, industry, capabilities or creativity that had been shoe-horned into twentieth-century historiography with little benefit to either the historiography or to its earlier seventeenth- and eighteenth-century subject matter. Adding this heterogeneous subject matter to the history and historiography of political and economic thought not only opened up new ways to think about the normative and causal dimensions of the two subjects, but also made it possible to inject more awareness of historical contingency, historical reflection and historical self-consciousness into the received accounts of the origins and nature of modern political thought. In this sense, Hont’s historical practice echoed the practice of the subjects of his research, from Hobbes and Pufendorf to Rousseau, Smith, Kant and Marx.

This emphasis on historical contingency and unintended outcomes was a consistent feature of Hont’s work, starting with his first publication on Adam Smith in 1981 as his part of the introduction to the collection of essays that he published with Michael Ignatieff under the

---

The initial procedure, in the introduction to Wealth and Virtue, was to show how some of the effects of expediency, particularly economic growth and rising prosperity, were compatible with some of the properties of justice. This procedure seemed to indicate that careful analysis of the component parts of what Smith took to be a dual system, or one that could satisfy the demands of both justice and expediency, would lead towards a fuller picture of how the two had come to be articulated. The starting point of this analysis was the
Grotian distinction between perfect and imperfect rights. This distinction had an analytical and historical connection to the related distinction between property rights and entitlements to welfare, but, as Hont went on to show, the connection itself was more equivocal than it might seem. Needs and welfare appear to fall under the rubric of expediency, while property and rights belong more firmly, at least in Grotian terms, to the subject of justice. Paradoxically, however, giving priority to property makes it easier to recognise the claims of distributive justice both because the types of inequality associated with property can be measured more readily than those associated with, for example, desert, talent or merit and because taxes on different types of property usually supply the resources required for welfare. Giving priority to welfare, however, not only has the effect of raising a question mark against strict definitions of property, but, by doing so, it also makes it more difficult to keep questions of desert, talent or merit out of the subject of distributive justice. This was the somewhat counter-intuitive argument that Hont wanted to highlight in the introduction to Wealth and Virtue.\(^9\) Putting the emphasis on property helped, paradoxically, to bring the distributive issues into sharper focus. And, as he also began to show, working out the relationship between justice and expediency was complicated further by Smith’s engagement with the thought of several of his contemporaries, notably the English Anglican divine, Josiah Tucker, his Scots interlocutor, David Hume, the Genevan republican, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the French advocates of the system of reform that came to be called Physiocracy. His first major article, on the “Rich Country-Poor Country Debate”, that was also published in Wealth and Virtue, focussed on the Tucker-Hume debate because, independently of its intrinsic interest, it presented two radically different approaches to the bearing of the subject of expediency and justice –and the related subject of markets and morality - on modern politics. As Hont went on to show in a sequel to the essay published some three decades later in 2008, the debate between Tucker and Hume was probably the most sophisticated version of a Europe-wide debate that has still

Although both endorsed what appeared to be the same system of free trade or natural liberty, implying therefore positive support for an Anglo-Scottish or Anglo-Irish common market, they still diverged on what they thought that its outcome would be.

For Tucker, free trade was the means to correct the unequal distribution of wealth and power between rich and poor countries because the lower input costs of the latter were likely to favour a gradual rebalancing of economic activity in their favour. In one sense, Hume’s case for free trade was less morally compelling, although, from another point of view, it was also less morally demanding. The input costs of poor countries were, he acknowledged, likely to be lower, but the goods supplied by rich countries would still remain competitive, either because of higher levels of productivity, or because of a continuing capacity to innovate in both products and processes, or because the quantity and variety of different types of capital and skill in rich countries favoured more mobility of resources between different sectors of the economy as market conditions changed. On Hume’s terms, free trade was not likely to change the relative distribution of resources between rich and poor countries, but it still meant that the absolute wealth of both would grow. In this sense, Hume’s argument complemented his broader, utility based, moral theory, with its emphasis on justice as an artificial virtue and on the interplay between property, the emotions and specialised institutions as the cause of its historical emergence.

Hume’s account of justice as an artificial virtue, was paralleled by Rousseau’s. Here, the link between justice and politics was even more pronounced. Where Hume was publicly sceptical towards social contract theory, Rousseau made it the basis of political legitimacy and, at the same time, also emphasised the large number of additional conditions, particularly with respect to the distribution of property and taxation, required to keep the contractual basis of political society alive. In this respect, Rousseau’s political thought seemed to foreshadow the more comprehensive indictment of modern political societies made by the advocates of Physiocracy or, as they also described it, the new science of political economy. As the title of

---

their 1767 manifesto - *L'Ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques* or “the natural and essential order of political societies” - was designed to indicate, modern political societies were the outcome of what the French physiocrats described as an unnatural and retrograde process of development, in which manufacturing industry, foreign trade and urban society had grown up ahead of agriculture, population and domestic trade, leaving the modern world to face a choice between barbarism and civilisation or, more broadly, between continuing along the same, ultimately fatal course or adopting the Physiocratic reform programme of free trade, a single tax and a legal despot. In important respects, Smith’s thought overlapped with all three of these positions. He shared Hume’s view of justice; he endorsed Rousseau’s claim that a free state was also a fiscal state; and he subscribed to the Physiocratic programme of free trade. Yet, as Hont went to great lengths to show, first in his comparison between Smith and the Physiocrats in 1989, then in his examination of Smith’s history of law and government, and finally in his Carlyle lectures of 2009, Smith’s final position differed from all three. It did so, as Hont also showed, mainly on the basis of the comprehensive historical vision that came to inform Smith’s treatment of both justice and expediency.

Hont’s description of this historical vision launched the final part of the work that he had begun some three decades earlier. Its centrepiece was the idea that the apparently long-established division of Europe’s history into, for example, the ancient and the modern or the medieval, the renaissance and the modern had, largely in the twentieth century, come to obscure a different, less linear, way of thinking about the relationship between the past and the present. In this vision of the past, Europe had a double history, made up of two historical cycles, the first southern and Roman and the second northern and German. This double history, Hont argued, was the basis of Smith’s politics because, he went on to show, it supplied the reasons for Smith’s willingness to claim that the “unnatural and retrograde order” underlying the history of modern European political societies contained enough of a mixture of both the ancient and the modern to forestall or obstruct a rerun of the cycle of decline and fall that had brought Europe’s first, Roman-driven, history to an end. The history of this way of thinking about Europe’s history began with Montesquieu and the unusual
historical vision that informed all of Montesquieu’s works. It was taken considerably further not only by Smith (and Gibbon) in Britain, but by the host of Montesquieu’s other European admirers or critics from Rousseau to Hegel. As Hont went on to show, Smith’s version of this history, with its emphasis, firstly, on the moral and political afterlife of the structures of authority and power prevailing in the pastoral societies that overran the Roman empire and, secondly, on the concentrations of industry and trade located in the fortified towns that survived after Rome’s decline and fall, supplied the basis of what, in the early nineteenth century, became the Whig interpretation of history. In other guises, however, it was also one of the key sources of political romanticism and, more broadly, of the many philosophies of history of the nineteenth century, stretching from Hegel to Comte and from Tocqueville to Marx and Weber.

A generation ago, it was usual to say that the rise of political economy marked the separation of politics from economics. Much recent scholarship, particularly that centred on Machiavelli and republicanism, has focussed on traditions of thought or types of discourse in which the two could once more be integrated. After Hont, it is now more likely that the next generation will say that the rise of political economy actually established the foundations of modern politics. Much future scholarship, particularly that centred on the nineteenth century, is likely to focus on what the components of those foundations can be taken to be.