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István Hont (1947 – 2013)

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Outside of Cambridge, it is widely believed that there is a ‘Cambridge School’ in the history of political thought. Within Cambridge, the existence of such a ‘school’ is much less obvious. Agreement on the scholars who should be associated with it, or on its distinctive intellectual characteristics, would be hard to come by. Among recent practitioners of the subject, István Hont, Reader in the History of Political Thought in the Faculty of History and Fellow of King’s, embodied this disjunction more sharply than anyone. To colleagues (including this writer) who work in the field he cultivated – one which extended over the whole of European political thought from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries – he is the reason why Cambridge has been the reference point for original and creative enquiry. Yet few of them would have regarded Hont as representative of a ‘Cambridge’ school, and any who ventured so to think of him would have been brusquely disabused of the notion by Hont himself. He was not ‘of’ Cambridge by background and intellectual formation, and he never allowed his long tenure of a University post here to domesticate him, institutionally or intellectually. At the same time, he believed passionately in the importance of his subject, and in the responsibility of Cambridge historians to uphold this, and to take the lead in the subject’s pursuit and propagation. The combination of denial and affirmation was often infuriating, to colleagues within as well as outwith the history of political thought, in Cambridge and beyond; but it was, as I shall try to show, the key to his quite remarkable contribution to the subject, and to the study of history more generally.

István Hont was born in Hungary in April 1947, of secular Jewish parents, and educated in Budapest at the King Stephen I Gymnasium. Russian was compulsory, and István learned it; but he never afterwards used it, although he was a good linguist, who read German, French and Italian. On leaving school he did a year of national service in the Hungarian army (1964-65), and then began to study Electronic Engineering at the Budapest Institute
of Technology, completing Part I of the degree in 1968. Even if engineering was not to be his future, these were far from wasted years. Amidst all his scholarship, István was a lifelong car enthusiast, devouring auto magazines and freely advising colleagues on what they should be driving. But in 1968 he changed course, switching to History and Philosophy at the University of Budapest. Winning a Prize Studentship in 1970, he completed his MA in 1973, and proceeded immediately to the Dr Ph., which he gained in 1974. His doctoral thesis, supervised by Professor Éva Balázs, was on ‘David Hume and Scotland’. He was appointed a Research Officer in the Institute of History in the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, a post which required membership of the Communist Party. There his duties included making summaries of the *Economic History Review*, which then occupied the place in historical studies now held by *Past and Present*; he thus acquired his encyclopaedic knowledge of modern economic and social history.

In this position, he was also asked to act as driver and guide to Michael Postan, Professor of Economic History at Cambridge, during a visit by Postan to Budapest. It was a crucial connection. Postan detected the young Hont’s frustration, and subsequently encouraged and helped him to come to England. In 1975, István and his wife Anna visited England, and just as their Hungarian ‘exit’ visas were due to run out, took the brave decision to seek leave to remain in the United Kingdom. Re-starting his academic career here was not easy; Anna, a sociologist, was unable to continue hers, and instead learned computing in order to provide them with an income. István went first to Oxford, where he resumed his study of the Scottish Enlightenment and Hume’s political economy under the supervision of Hugh Trevor-Roper. He also attended Sir John Hicks’s classes in the history of economic thought, laying the foundations for his interest in the history of political economy. He clearly appreciated Hicks’s free-wheeling style of teaching, expounding the ideas of the great economists, but also setting them in context. In 1977 he was appointed to the Research Fellowship in Intellectual History at Wolfson College, Oxford. A year later, however, he moved across to King’s College, Cambridge, to direct the newly-established Research Centre project on ‘Political Economy and Society 1750-1850’, along with Michael Ignatieff.
The six years of the project established Hont’s reputation as a scholar of uncompromising intellectual purpose. He and Ignatieff organised a series of ground-breaking conferences, which not only recast the history of political economy but transformed understanding of its wider intellectual context in moral, social and political thought. The first conference, in 1979, brought together Duncan Forbes (Reader in the History of Political Thought and Fellow of Clare, who claimed not to have set foot in King’s for over a decade), Nicholas Phillipson, John Pocock, Franco Venturi and Donald Winch, along with younger scholars; the second, in 1984 assembled a much larger cast, including John Dunn, James Moore, Judith Shklar, Quentin Skinner, and Richard Tuck, as well as the leading German intellectual historians, Hans Erich Bödeker and Reinhardt Koselleck, the latter the principal exponent of Begriffsgeschichte. But it was Hont who set the agenda, in the first with his paper on the ‘Rich country – poor country problem’, and in the second with early versions of his papers on Natural Law, Pufendorf, and Adam Smith.

What Hont christened the ‘rich country – poor country problem’ in eighteenth-century Scottish political economy concerned the development prospects of countries which lagged behind richer neighbours, as Scotland then lagged behind England. The issue was whether the poor country would be able to take advantage of its poverty, in particular its lower wage costs, to achieve a competitive advantage over its neighbour, and in due course catch it up. The question engaged all the major economic thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, David Hume, James Steuart, Adam Smith and several others; their foil was the sceptical English economist, Josiah Tucker, who argued that England would retain its advantage. But Hont’s point was that the Scots were neither of one voice nor simple economic nationalists: both Hume and Smith recognised that the rich countries would indeed retain their advantages, through their capacity for manufacturing innovation and an intensifying division of labour. Nevertheless, poor countries should keep their nerve: only through entry into the international market place could they improve their absolute position, even if they might never catch up altogether. Already, Hont had pinpointed what would be a leitmotif of his analysis of
eighteenth-century political economy: securing the benefits of commerce and of commercial society was not for the faint-hearted.

An essay on this theme was Hont’s own contribution to the volume which eventually resulted from the first conference, *Wealth and Virtue. The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, published by the Cambridge University Press in 1983. But by that time he had added a second strand to his interrogation of Scottish thought, which he brought to the fore in the volume’s introductory essay, co-written with Michael Ignatieff, on ‘Needs and justice in the *Wealth of Nations*’. The essay argued that Smith’s great work should be read as the culmination of an intensifying critique of Scholastic Natural Law’s concept of distributive justice. It was a critique from within natural jurisprudence: Smith was the heir of Grotius, Pufendorf and Locke. But his was the definitive answer to Aquinas: only a system of competitive markets in food and labour, not charity informed by the principles of distributive justice, would guarantee adequate subsistence to the labouring poor. The importance of the Natural Law tradition for the political thought of the Scottish Enlightenment had previously been signalled by Duncan Forbes; Hont demonstrated just how Smith had responded to it, over-turning one of its central tenets.

As his papers to the second conference revealed, however, Hont conceived of the natural law tradition as the key not only to explaining the *Wealth of Nations*; it would also provide the historical connection with the political economy of Marx. Briefly there surfaced in these conference contributions, which were never published, a constant but usually submerged dimension of Hont’s intellectual agenda: the need to settle accounts with Marx and his followers. There was nothing simplistic or crudely political in this: Hont never identified with right-wing critiques of Marx and Marxism. His register was that of intellectual-historical scholarship: only at this depth would Marxism’s theoretical limitations be exposed and understood. In these papers, Smith was set between Pufendorf and Marx; Marx’s failing was to have missed the extent to which classical political economy was a response to the larger moral and political issues explored in the Natural Law tradition. In particular, Marx had failed to grasp why modern commercial society was so successful a response to the Hobbesian
problem of man’s natural aversion to society: it was precisely self-interest, the willingness to labour and the propensity to exchange, which had drawn man into, and now kept him within, an ordered, economically viable society. The first part of this argument would be published, three years later, as ‘The language of sociability and commerce: Samuel Pufendorf and the theoretical foundations of the “Four Stages Theory”’, in a volume on The Languages of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe, edited by Anthony Pagden (Cambridge, 1987). But the missing second part, taking the argument up to Marx, would never appear in print.

The King’s Political Economy Project ended in 1984, and Hont spent the following academic year as a Simon Fellow at the University of Manchester. In 1986 he was appointed to an Assistant Professorship in Political Science at Columbia. He spent the next three years in the United States, one of them (1987-88) as a Visiting Member of the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton. He was always attracted to the direct, vigorous style of academic exchange he found there, which was so suited to his own seriousness of purpose; he also appreciated the theoretical edge given to the historical study of political thought at these and other US institutions. Although his return to Cambridge in 1989 would prove to be definitive, there was no guarantee of this at the time. He would hold visiting appointments at Harvard in 1999 and 2000, and was appointed to a tenured position there, only for the offer to be withdrawn at the insistence of a President determined that new appointees must be under fifty.

He returned to Cambridge to succeed Duncan Forbes as the lecturer in the History Faculty primarily responsible for eighteenth-century political thought, for the first three years as a University Assistant Lecturer, then as University Lecturer, and belatedly, from 2008, as Reader in the History of Political Thought. It was an appointment with major implications for the development of the history of political thought at Cambridge. Duncan Forbes had played a key role in the revival of this subject at the University, through his Special Subject on ‘Hume, Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment’, whose takers had included Quentin Skinner and John Dunn (as well as many others later to practice intellectual history – a prosopography of Forbes’s classes would tell us a great deal about the development of the field in the second
half of the twentieth century). But for reasons yet to be properly explained, Skinner and Dunn had chosen to make the seventeenth century the focus of their initial, transformative scholarship; and from there Skinner would go further back still, identifying the ‘foundations’ of modern political thought in the Renaissance. Forbes had continued to lecture, defiantly and idiosyncratically, on the Scots and on Hegel, but never associated himself with the methodological or historical claims of those former students, now his colleagues. Hont certainly did not return to Cambridge in 1989 to join a ‘school’; rather he would exploit the freedom which Forbes had preserved for himself. But he did renew the agenda which he had mapped out in the course of the King’s College Project on Political Economy, and had since deepened and extended by study and teaching in America: he now asserted, as Forbes had never wished to do, that eighteenth-century political philosophers and economists had laid many of the intellectual foundations of the modern commercial world.

He did so first of all by his teaching. When Hont returned to Cambridge, the status of the history of political thought was asserted principally through lecturing – a great deal of it: he would later speak wistfully of the years when a single paper, covering political thought from 1700 to 1890, was the subject of over a hundred lectures. He was no less demanding a lecturer than a scholar, expecting undergraduates to reach above their heads, sometimes high above them, to grasp his arguments. He spoke best without notes, but with extensive hand-outs of textual quotations; he conveyed utter conviction, but at a level of complexity which pre-empted dogmatism. No-one could hear a lecture by Hont without realising that she or he was being told something important, something which it was important to try to understand. As an undergraduate supervisor, first impressions were similarly uncompromising; but if the student responded, and made the effort to engage, so would he. He was endlessly generous in reading essays, even those written simply as exam practice, a task most supervisors find less than rewarding.

Increasingly, a second strand of his teaching was devoted to graduates. With Quentin Skinner, Richard Tuck, Anthony Pagden, Gareth Stedman Jones and later Annabel Brett, he played a major part in the establishment of the M.Phil. in Political Thought and
Intellectual History. This immediately commanded an international reputation, and became the History Faculty’s most successful M.Phil., while also involving colleagues in Politics and International Relations. The classes in which Hont introduced the new graduates to the study of a selected text, most recently Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, were famous for taking no prisoners. Students who imagined that an internship in a management consultancy had given them a fair grasp of Adam Smith needed to be summarily disabused of their misapprehension: they were now at Cambridge, where the bar for beginning the study of Smith (or Hobbes, or Hume, or Kant) was set higher than anywhere else. Such rigour ensured, however, that those who responded to the demands of the M.Phil. would be well-prepared for the PhD.

At this level too, Hont was a famously demanding supervisor. But this was not dirigisme: intellectual independence had the highest value in his estimation of a doctoral student, and those who possessed it flourished. Initially he talked a student through the bibliography and the crucial questions at stake in a topic, often for hours at a time; later he would read and re-read drafts of the thesis, with the same patience and attention he gave to undergraduate essays, but necessarily taking even more time. Some of his students extended and deepened his own studies of Scottish thinkers; but many took Hont’s insights elsewhere, into French, German and Italian thought. Increasingly also they took their investigations forwards in time, into the early nineteenth century. Among the earliest of these doctoral students were Béla Kapossy and Richard Whatmore; more recently Isaac Nakhimovsky, Iain McDaniel and Sophus Reinert (among many others) have joined them in an enquiry in which Hont was always a close and supportive collaborator, but never sought to be the director.

The final dimension of Hont’s higher pedagogy was the weekly Seminar in Political Thought and Intellectual History. In its most recent incarnation, this was very much his model of a research seminar, at which graduate attendance, both M.Phil. and Ph.D., was expected. Recognising the possibilities of new technology, Hont instituted a website where papers would be made available in advance, creating the opportunity for a formal Comment as well as for extended discussion of the paper during the seminar itself. His standard was that of the
best American schools, below which Cambridge should by no means fall: here too, he saw no need to take prisoners when a speaker failed to address critical questions.

Meanwhile, during the 1990s, Hont had steadily advanced his own scholarly agenda, with articles on neo-Machiavellian political economy and the ‘economic limits to national politics’ at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, on the intellectually-vexed issue of public credit, and David Hume’s apparently alarmist response to its growth in Britain in particular, and on conceptions of the nation-state and nationalism in the later eighteenth century and during the French Revolution. Long articles in form, each of these was worth a book, treating its subject with an originality which transformed understanding of its significance. Not all his projects reached publication: this was particularly, and regrettably, true of an extended collaborative enquiry, conceived with Hans Erich Bödeker and Keith Tribe, and soon involving scholars from across Europe, into the early definition and teaching of political economy in the universities.

Eventually, the major articles of the 1980s and 1990s were collected in a single volume, *Jealousy of Trade. International Competition and the Nation State in Historical Perspective*, published by Harvard University Press in 2005. In effect, however, this was two books in one: an invaluable collection of previously-published articles, but also a new book, framed by a long introduction on the theme of ‘jealousy of trade’. The phrase was adapted from the title of one of David Hume’s economic essays, and pointed to the way in which commercial competition had exacerbated the rivalry hitherto fostered by political ‘reason of state’: between modern commercial nations, wars of empire and conquest in pursuit of markets and resources were almost inevitable. The interest of eighteenth-century political economy lay in the sophistication of its attempts to make sense of this development. Some, such as Montesquieu, had seen commerce itself as the cure: *doux commerce* would temper national rivalry. But this reading of political economy, endorsed by Albert Hirschman in his brilliant, influential *The Passions and the Interests. Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (1977), was found wanting by Hont. To him Hume and Smith had gone deeper, demonstrating not just that poor countries might never overhaul rich ones, but that national
emulation in commerce was ineradicable. The challenge was not to eliminate it, but to check misguided ‘jealousy’ in trade, and ensure that rivalry was conducted without malice, avoiding the premature resort to war. To Hont this was just as much a challenge for the modern, post-1989 global economic order as it had been for the eighteenth century: Jealousy of Trade was an intervention in contemporary politics as well as in historical scholarship.

By the time the book was published in 2005, new projects were already in hand. One, begun in the late 1990s, was a complete re-thinking of the standard narrative of the eighteenth-century ‘luxury debate’. Hitherto it had been assumed that Mandeville and Hume had successfully legitimated luxury, leaving only Rousseau and his followers unconvinced. Hont argued that the crucial text in reviving the issue had in fact been Fénelon’s Telemachus (1699), which had projected a ‘balanced’ economy of country and town as an antidote to luxury; a further critical intervention was Montesquieu’s Spirit of the Laws (1748), which ensured that the arguments of Mandeville and Hume would fail to persuade Continental European readers living in large, agriculture-based monarchies. Regrettably, this was another of Hont’s projects of which only the first half reached publication, in a long chapter in The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought (2006); this stops abruptly short of Montesquieu. But seminar papers and conversation, not least with his close colleague in King’s, the French historian Michael Sonenscher, have made it possible to grasp the main findings of the project’s missing second half.

A second project picked up the threads of Hont’s earlier work on sociability, and explored the theme anew in the thinking of Rousseau and Adam Smith, two thinkers often thought antithetical, but whom Hont believed should be seen as closely related, arguing differently over common ground. This project was the subject of the Carlyle Lectures in Oxford in 2009 and of the Schiller and Benedict Lectures delivered respectively in Jena and Boston a year later; since a text exists of the Carlyle Lectures, it is possible, though far from certain, that with editing the lectures can be published.

By the summer of 2011 it was clear that István’s health, already uncertain as a result of diabetes and a heart operation, was deteriorating. Over a period of months he was diagnosed
with a rare blood condition, which dramatically reduced his immunity. Determination and persistence on the part of Anna secured treatments from University College Hospital in London as well as from Addenbrooke’s, but István’s ability to work was increasingly disrupted.

Nevertheless in the Michaelmas Term of 2011 he pressed ahead with what was to be his final project, a seminar for Ph.D. students, co-directed with Duncan Kelly, on ‘The cultural history of the history of political thought’. The suggestion of a ‘cultural’ history was little more than ironic; Hont was dismissive of the reductive tendency of much recent cultural history. Instead, the seminar set out to explore the construction of the history of political thought by its major exponents since the late nineteenth century, when it had been established as central to both the Cambridge History Tripos and the Oxford School of Modern History. The seminar’s ‘canon’ of historians of political thought was unexpected, running from J.C. Bluntschli through Friedrich Meinecke, Carl Schmitt, Michael Oakeshott, Leo Strauss, John Rawls and Michel Foucault, before ending with ‘the Cambridge School’, identified for this purpose with Quentin Skinner, John Dunn and John Pocock. As Hont and Kelly proceeded to explain, the modern history of political thought was by no means born in Cambridge, of purely English or even Anglo-American parentage. Oakeshott, Strauss, Rawls and Foucault were particularly commended as historians of political thought (and sharply distinguished from their followers, the Oakshottians, Straussian, Rawlsians etc.) But the conclusion to the series was no less unexpectedly eirenic.

There was no coherent ‘Cambridge School’, Hont confirmed, for the simple and obvious reason that its supposed members agreed on very little, while the early forays into methodology had been polemical, ways of asserting the presence of a new generation of young scholars. What there was, nevertheless, was a profound disagreement over the history of the idea of the state in Europe since antiquity. In very different ways, the same question had been at the heart of the enquiries of Dunn, Skinner and Pocock, as it had been of those of their Swiss, German, French and Anglo-American predecessors. The need to answer the question was the reason why the history of political thought came into existence, and why
it had stood, and should remain, at the heart of all historical study, above all in Cambridge. Defiantly ignoring his illness, Hont never suggested that the seminar should be taken as his legacy. But there can be little doubt that he intended it to be so. It was his injunction to his colleagues and to the current generation of graduate students in the History of Political Thought to maintain their predecessors’ focus on the state, and to continue to insist on its central importance to historical understanding.

Hont’s perspective on the history of political thought was not without its limits: like almost all Cambridge exponents of the subject until very recently, he ignored religion, assuming that modern political thought was secular, beginning with Hobbes, and omitting the ‘irredeemably Christian’ Locke. The lack of interest in theology marked his treatment of Natural Law in particular, prompting Jim Moore’s genial remark that his account of Pufendorf was ‘the Istvánian heresy’. But Hont was ready to learn: in his final years, even theology was absorbed – sometimes with unexpected results, as when he asked a baffled seminar speaker to address the matter of James Mill’s soteriology. But this was characteristic. Hont always possessed the curiosity of a good historian, combining it with seriousness of philosophical purpose. Together, these were what it meant to study the history of political thought at Cambridge. If he always remembered and insisted that he was not ‘of’ Cambridge, being formed elsewhere, he was nonetheless fiercely committed ‘to’ Cambridge, and to the indispensable role of the history of political thought – of thinking about the state – to the study of history in this University.

István Hont died on 29 March 2013, after months of ever-increasing difficulty, whose implications he persisted in denying, even as he depended on the devoted attention of Anna. A memorial meeting will be held in King’s College early in September; a colloquium in his honour and memory will be organised under the aegis of the History Faculty’s Political Thought and Intellectual History Subject Group some time in 2014.

**Major Publications**

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