

Parallels and contrasts:

A review of Istvan Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*  
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In 2009 Istvan Hont gave the Carlyle Lectures at Oxford, choosing as his topic 'Visions of Politics in Commercial Society: Comparing Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith'. This book is a lightly edited version of the texts that Hont lectured from. If he developed or refined the argument before he died in 2013, there is no record of such alterations here. Nor is there any of the extraordinarily dense and erudite footnoting that is characteristic of the rest of Hont's published work. The experience of reading Hont is often akin to that of being shown a familiar landscape from a completely new point of view. What you thought you knew well is suddenly reconfigured, familiar objects are related in unfamiliar ways, details that you had previously overlooked acquire unsuspected significance. The footnotes, with their minute examinations of exegetical questions, their signposts for journeys through rarely explored tracts of primary material, and their comprehensive surveys of scholarship in several different languages, have the effect of reassuring you that, far from being a matter of mere interpretative ingenuity, this novel way of seeing the landscape is how it would always look if only you knew more and thought harder. Without the footnotes, though, you are not so sure. The reading experience is exciting, just as the Carlyle Lectures must have been exciting to listen to, but afterwards you are left in a state of exhilarated confusion, unsure of how to make sense of the many bewilderingly unexpected views that you have been shown. The disorientation is compounded by the state of the text itself. What in the Examination Schools in Oxford might have sounded like a sparkling assemblage of insights and provocations often appears on the printed page as a disorganised paragraph of bald assertions about one thing followed, for no obvious reason, by bald assertions about something quite different. In a 'Note on the Text' the editors of *Politics in Commercial Society* claim that 'these lectures form a coherent and highly structured study that needs no further elaboration' (xxi). This is generous to a fault. Moreover, it is hard to believe that Hont himself would have made such a claim. A very large amount of further elaboration would have been needed to transform this text into something comparable to Hont's magisterial *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective*.<sup>1</sup> That, presumably, is one reason why Hont did not publish his lectures himself.

Even so, this is a fascinating book that richly rewards the reader who is prepared to be disorientated and confused. It does not present and argue for a clear and detailed thesis about politics in a commercial society. Nor does it give a comprehensive

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<sup>1</sup> Harvard University Press, 2005.

interpretation of the political thought of Rousseau and of Smith. What it does instead is to relate Rousseau and Smith to each other in a novel and unexpected ways. Hont's aim, he says, 'is to produce parallels and contrasts that are surprising'. 'Our pictures of both Rousseau and Smith have changed ...', he continues, so '... what happens if we take these new views of Rousseau and Smith and juxtapose them? Perhaps new aspects, fresh views, of their thought will come into focus and we can gain more in our understanding of their work' (1). Our picture of Smith has been changed by the realization that he was deeply interested in and engaged with the tradition of modern natural law, a tradition that Hont believed to lead ineluctably back to Hobbes.<sup>2</sup> Our picture of Rousseau has been changed by the realization that he, too, owed a significant intellectual debt to a broadly Hobbesian line of thought.<sup>3</sup> The parallels between Rousseau and Smith that Hont is interested in, then, are not those to which attention has been drawn by those struck by the extent to which Rousseau's condemnations of the moral consequences of commercial sociability are echoed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*.<sup>4</sup> The agenda is not to show that Smith was more Rousseauian than is generally thought. It would be more accurate to say that Hont means to show Rousseau to have been more Smithian than is generally thought. The target of Rousseau's polemic was not commercial society as such, but rather, as Hont puts it, 'the excesses of commercial society'. Rousseau, like Smith, occupied a position 'somewhere in the middle of a moral and economic spectrum stretching from the minimalism of the ancient Cynics to the full hedonism and pro-luxury position of those who were dubbed Epicureans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' (91).

Hont means to show how the essentially Hobbesian moral psychology of the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* makes it intelligible that what Rousseau wanted was, in fact, 'a society based on labor and personal private property, developing in an exchange-based commercial society in which everything grew in a balanced way, where the creative tensions between body and mind were exploited harmoniously, both in man-to-nature and human-to-human, or social, relationships' (104). This is indeed a surprising way of reading Rousseau, and it is probably true to say that in *Politics in Commercial Society* received wisdom about Rousseau is more comprehensively and dramatically challenged

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<sup>2</sup> This was the achievement, especially, of Knud Haakonssen: see *The Science of a Legislator: The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Rousseau is described as one of the eighteenth century's 'most perceptive readers of Hobbes' by Richard Tuck in *The Rights of War and Peace: Political Thought and the International Order from Grotius to Kant*, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 197-207. Rousseau's response to the natural jurisprudence tradition, Tuck argues, was 'a profound reconsideration of its origins, in which (in many ways) the original insights of both Grotius and Hobbes were restated in new form' (p. 197).

<sup>4</sup> The fullest development of this reading of Smith is Ryan Patrick Hanley, *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue* (Cambridge University Press, 2009). See also Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008.

than is received wisdom about Smith. It is proper, however, that a review in this journal should focus on Hont's reading of Smith, and, in particular, on how Hont thinks Smith looks when approached by way of 'parallels and contrasts' with Rousseau. The interpretation of *The Wealth of Nations* given here is the same as the one that Hont, together with Michael Ignatieff, proposed over 30 years ago in the introduction to the seminal collection *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*.<sup>5</sup> Smith remains primarily a theorist of justice, concerned 'with finding a market mechanism capable of reconciling inequality of property with adequate provision for the excluded', and convinced that the language of modern natural jurisprudence provided the intellectual resources for the construction of an argument for 'strict justice over civic virtue, passive liberty over active'.<sup>6</sup> Smith remains also a political economist deeply worried by the international dimension of modern politics. What is new here, so far as I know, is an extended development of the idea that Rousseau played a vital role in the development of the theory of sociability upon which rested Smith's jurisprudence and his political economy.<sup>7</sup> In what follows I shall restrict myself to pulling this narrative thread out of the warp and weft of Hont's text, in order to get some of its principal claims into better focus.

## 2

We begin, on Hont's conjectural reconstruction of Smith's intellectual development, with Smith in Hutcheson's moral philosophy class, a witness to his teacher's failure to marry Stoicism and republicanism with the post-Pufendorfian framework that dominated the academic natural jurisprudence of the time. The key difficulty for republicans like Hutcheson was the lack of fit between Stoic morality and a moralised republican politics, on the one hand, and Pufendorf's fundamentally Hobbesian theory of sociability on the other. Smith, as Hont puts it, was 'a dissident pupil of Hutcheson' (19). He was a dissident in that he responded immediately and positively to the attempt made by Hume in Book 3 of *A Treatise of Human Nature* to show how law and government, the

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<sup>5</sup> Cambridge University Press, 1983. The introduction is reprinted as chapter 6 of *Jealousy of Trade*, pp. 389-443.

<sup>6</sup> *Jealousy of Trade*, pp. 390, 443.

<sup>7</sup> There is little about the Smith-Rousseau relationship in *Jealousy of Trade* -- apart from an incidental acknowledgement that 'Rousseau is an important if unavowed interlocutor in the passages in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* which Smith devoted to the pursuit of wealth in modern society' (p. 400). The next paragraph begins: 'Smith broke decisively with the modern Stoic and Rousseauvian critique of modern deception'. Rousseau figures more significantly in Hont's 2009 essay 'Adam Smith's History of Law and Government as Political Theory', but the relationship is not explored there in any detail: see Richard Bourke and John Dunn (eds.), *Political Judgment: Essays for John Dunn*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 131-71, esp. p. 148.

conditions of the possibility of social life, could be developed without the supposition either of natural sociability, in the manner of the Stoics, or of an original contract, in the manner of the Hobbes and Pufendorf. What Hume demonstrated through his story of the slow and haphazard development of conventions regulating property and promises was that there was no need to postulate the existence of law prior to and independent of the institutions of government. Rather, a more historically plausible account -- in other words, a natural history -- could be sketched of the evolution of authority in the family and the tribe or clan, and of how such authority turned, with the enlargement and, as Hont puts it, 'intensification' of society (61), into something like the rule of law. Smith supplemented and structured the Humean account with the four-stage theory of societal development, and, according to Hont, he did so early on in his career. The stadial theory was first expounded in the lectures ('evening classes', Hont says (55)) that Smith gave in Edinburgh in 1750-51).<sup>8</sup> Hont believes, though without giving any evidence, that by the early 1750s Smith had already begun work on a comprehensive theory of law and politics. This means that what Hont calls 'the law and politics project' is not to be seen as 'an extension and continuation' of the moral philosophy of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.<sup>9</sup> Hont's suggestion is that, on the contrary, '*The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was the kind of moral theory it was ... because it was already a prologue to the law and politics enterprise that Smith had embarked on' (56).

What Smith is doing in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, according to Hont, is showing a way of establishing a connection between an up-to-date, post-Hobbesian, analysis of sociability and Smith's own, post-Montesquieuan, take on the question of the origins and nature of politics in the modern republic. Smith knew Mandeville's answer, in the first instalment of *The Fable of the Bees*, to the question of how Hobbesian man was 'broke', and, like Hutcheson and Hume, could not accept it. He also knew the rather different answer to the question given by Mandeville in 'Part Two' of *The Fable*. But something had to happen before Smith appreciated the full significance of Mandeville's revised account of the nature of man and society, and that, Hont thinks, was an encounter with Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*. In large part *Politics in Commercial Society* is about the effects on Smith of the second *Discourse*, as evidenced in the first instance by the *Letter to the Authors of the Edinburgh Review* of 1756. What Rousseau helped Smith to see was the possibility of both denying natural sociability, in the manner of modern

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<sup>8</sup> It is more controversial than Hont acknowledges exactly how developed Smith's jurisprudence was in the Edinburgh lectures: for argument to back up Hont's hypothesis here, see Nicholas Phillipson, *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life*, Allen Lane, 2010, pp. 102-19.

<sup>9</sup> Hont claims, without naming names, that this is how Smith is 'often' read 'in modern American thought' (56). The text is marred by a number of rather violent swipes at those who read Smith and/or Rousseau differently from Hont. The idea that Smith 'abandoned the traditional focus on social justice in favor of focusing on criminal justice', for example, is dismissed as 'an inexplicable howler on the part of some modern interpreters' (34). Hont very often claims that the truth of his interpretations is 'clear' or 'perfectly obvious' -- which it rarely is.

Epicureans like Hobbes and, arguably, Pufendorf, and at the same time giving a historical account of a moral culture sufficiently robust to function as a basis (though not, as we will see, a sufficient basis) for republican politics. The key notion here was *pity*, 'the only amiable principle which the English author [i.e., Mandeville] allows to be natural to man', a principle which, so Smith thought, Rousseau recognised to be 'capable of producing all those virtues, whose reality Dr. Mandeville denies'.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Hont claims, this estimate of the explanatory potential of pity is the 'cornerstone' of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (20). For pity, crucially, is *non-moral* as well as amiable. It is an automatic response to the plight of others that, in and of itself, is no more virtuous than love of self. To postulate a natural disposition to pity is not to suppose anything like Hutchesonian natural benevolence. What interested Smith was Rousseau's insight that pity could be used to show the non-moral but still natural origins of the entire edifice of morality.<sup>11</sup> And what interests Hont is the fact that, despite the fact that 'Smith and Rousseau shared a moral theory' -- 'at least up to a point' -- 'there were different political theories attached to the moral theory, leading to very different versions of republicanism' (22).

In Lectures 1 and 2, Hont explores the moral theory that Smith shared with Rousseau, and the consequent need to read *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as a 'generalization of the pity mechanism to every conceivable pattern of morality' (20). Hont claims that the 'direct imprint of Rousseau' is to be found in the very first sentences of Smith's book, where pity, or compassion, 'our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever', is introduced and re-named 'sympathy'.<sup>12</sup> 'The prelude to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*', Hont says, 'loudly advertised the idea that Smith had singled out as the most enthralling of Rousseau's ideas in his review of the second *Discourse*.' 'Anybody who knew Smith's review,' Hont continues, 'at least in Scotland and among his friends, could readily recognize this fact' (28). Thus there was a reason why several in Scotland, including Adam Ferguson and Thomas Reid, and later Dugald Stewart, read *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as an essentially Epicurean text; and the reason was that it *was* an essentially Epicurean text. Smith, on Hont's reading, 'made no secret of the fact that sympathy, as he understood it, was the truly central moral category of the amended selfish system'. His first book was 'a treatise in enhanced Hobbism and Epicureanism' (32). A lot hangs here, plainly enough, on what is meant by 'amended' and 'enhanced', and Hont does not do much to explain himself, nor to make it clear how his reading is compatible with the fact that Smith in many passages, including ones that Hont himself

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. L. D Wightman, Liberty Fund, 1982, p. 251.

<sup>11</sup> Hont claims, in fact, that Smith was already heading in this direction prior to his reading of Rousseau. Smith could recognise the real similarity between Rousseau and Mandeville because 'he had already rehearsed all these arguments in the controversies that surrounded the work of Hutcheson, his teacher' (33). No evidence is produced to back this claim up.

<sup>12</sup> It is debatable whether Smith understands 'sympathy' to be the same thing as 'pity': see Charles L. Griswold, 'Smith and Rousseau in Dialogue: Sympathy, *Pitié*, Spectatorship and Narrative', *Adam Smith Review* 5 (2010): 59-84, esp. pp. 61-71.

cites, seems intent on distancing himself sharply from the moral philosophy of egoism.<sup>13</sup> Hont also says that Smith was engaged in 'rescuing moral discourse from the selfish system without abandoning its basic insights' (32). The basic insights in question are, presumably, the denial of natural sociability, and the recognition of the importance of the satisfactions of what Hobbes called 'glory' and Rousseau called '*amour-propre*'. But the reader is left wondering whether this is enough for Smith's moral philosophy to be called enhanced or amended Epicureanism. Could it not be called, instead, enhanced or amended Stoicism? The Stoicism in question would be very different from Hutcheson's, because sceptical about the naturalness of sociability. But it might still be deserving of the name, because of the importance it attaches to obeying conscience out of respect for duty alone, without insistence on the conventionality of laws of justice, and with no reduction of moral judgment to calculations of utility.<sup>14</sup>

Hont would reject such a suggestion because he believes that, having dispensed with both natural sociability and the unamended and unenhanced Hobbesian vision of man as naturally wolf to man, Smith is left with *commercial sociability* as the only viable framework for an anatomical examination of morality. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Hont says, is 'a conjectural history of the origins of commercial society' (35). Smith had a lot to say about the morals of a society where every man is a merchant, and about how commerce, while it sinks the value of courage and is generally detrimental to martial spirit, encourages honesty, probity, reliability, punctuality, and so forth. But these can easily be seen as purely instrumental values, as no more than means to the end of financial success. They can also be seen as things that it is more important for the merchant to have a reputation for than to truly cultivate as virtues of character. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* makes it perfectly clear, though, that its author did not believe that ordinary moral agents, merchants presumably included, could be satisfied merely with a reputation for virtue. On Smith's account, what we crave is what might be called moral authenticity. We want, as Smith puts it, not only to be praised, but also to be able to believe ourselves to be worthy of praise. Consideration of ourselves from the point of view of an impartial spectator is introduced by Smith as a means whereby we are able to reassure ourselves that a reputation for virtue is deserved. Alternatively, it is a means whereby we find that we have been deceived by others, and have deceived ourselves, when we realise that we are much less admirable than we thought we were and than others had led us to believe. The moral life as depicted by Smith is a life of drama and

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<sup>13</sup> Hont makes no mention of the fact that in Part VII of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith says that Epicureanism is 'altogether inconsistent with that which I have been endeavouring to establish' (VII.ii.2.13; ed. Raphael and Macfie, Indianapolis, 1984, p. 298).

<sup>14</sup> It is not at all obvious that the Epicurean-Stoic dichotomy was as important to Smith as Hont believes. More generally, it is not obvious that the eighteenth-century tendency to divide philosophers up into either Stoics or Epicureans is a reliable guide to what the philosophers in question were about, philosophically speaking. It is possible that in fact part of what Hume and Smith, to choose two obvious examples, were trying to do was move things on, and to make it clear that old labels were no longer helpful.

anxiety, and in this respect he might be understood as arguing *against* Rousseau, and as replying to the second *Discourse* with a demonstration that, even in a commercial society, we have higher aspirations than respectability and the trappings of worldly success.<sup>15</sup> There is no trace of this aspect of Smith's moral philosophy in Hont's account. Hont would seem to believe that, according to Smith, the ethos of commercial society permeates every aspect of our being, just as Rousseau said it does. Smith and Rousseau, we have seen him say, 'shared a moral theory'. It is arguable, though, that while pity, or sympathy, may have given them a shared a point of departure, they parted ways some time before they arrived at questions of politics.

Empty as it is any trace of the Stoic concern for what can be believed (regardless of how it is perceived by others) to be good in itself, Smithian morality as depicted by Hont is entirely instrumental, and is 'fragile' because it is instrumental, fragile to the extent that '[i]t could not survive without being shored up by politics' (43). The reliance of morality on politics is another Hobbesian theme that Hont hears being played out in both Rousseau and Smith. Rousseau accepted Hobbes's case for absolute and undivided sovereignty as the only solution to the conflicts inevitably caused by the inability, in the end, of morality to unify the interests of a country's citizenry. Smith did not. He believed, with Montesquieu, that, given the right constitutional structure, division and disagreement could be contained and harnessed so as to become, precisely, enablers of a stable balance between liberty and authority. At this point in Hont's argument Rousseau's and Smith's contrasting visions of politics in commercial society come into view. But they do so only briefly, because Hont immediately moves on, in Lectures 3 and 4, to the related but, so one might think, different question of their respective accounts of the *origins* of government. Taking Hume as his guide, Smith rejected altogether the idea that government had its beginnings in a social contract. Rousseau, on the other hand, continued with the notion of an original contract, but transmuted it into the second *Discourse's* story of the rule of law as a con trick perpetrated by the rich upon the poor. 'The poor were sold on the advantages of legal equality', as Hont puts it, 'which were quite real, without understanding the consequences of superimposing it on a system of unregulated private property' (72). For Rousseau, we might say, the politics of *The Social Contract* was a means of overcoming and transcending history. For Smith, by contrast, the tendency of history gave grounds for political hope. While Rousseau, according to Hont, 'despaired of history' (106), Smith devoted himself 'a real history of Europe' (64). That history was a story of progress. More precisely, it was the story of the rise of an entirely new mode of political liberty.

What made it possible to think of European history in terms of progress and improvement was the realisation that in the wake of the decline and fall of Rome, a new historical cycle had begun. The first cycle had begun with the first beginnings of government and law in Attic Greece, had continued with the rise of Rome and its acquisition of an empire, and had ended with Rome's complete destruction at the hands

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<sup>15</sup> Hanley sees Smith as trying to revivify 'a certain vision of human greatness and nobility against a pervasive modern mediocrity' (*Adam Smith on the Character of Virtue*, p. 45). That is a further claim, which I do not mean to be endorsing here.

of Gothic tribes that had never made the fatal transition from the shepherd state to agriculture and then commerce.<sup>16</sup> The Italian city states of the Renaissance had succeeded in breathing new life into the political ideals of early Rome, but it was a mistake to think that they, and their demise, were evidence that the historical cycle of the ancient world was fated to repeat itself again and again. This was the mistake not only of Machiavelli and Harrington, but also of Rousseau, who imagined for Europe, in Hont's words, 'a bleak future of oscillation between despotism and egalitarianism, creating a reiterated cycle, or gyration ... of political instability' (52). The truth was that Venice and Florence were a side-show, of no real importance. The new political cycle -- traced by Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws* and Hume in *The History of England*, and then by Smith in Book III of *The Wealth of Nations* -- had begun with the Gothic holocaust, leading to the development of feudalism, then the rise of modern absolutism, followed by the break-down of absolutism, in England at least, in the seventeenth century. England had realised a distinctively *modern* form of liberty, *civil* liberty, founded on a security of property made possible by mixed government and the rule of law. Hont argues that Smith's history of post-Roman Europe should not be seen, simply, as the discarding of the republican analysis of politics in favour of the four stages theory of jurisprudential tradition. In fact, Smith remained a quintessentially republican political theorist to the extent that he accepted the idea that it was *luxury* that had destroyed both Rome and the feudal system. Smith 'turned republican political analysis into modern political science, just as much as he turned natural jurisprudence into theoretical history. Instead of separating the two, or replacing the one discourse with the other, he combined them. ... Smith forged a new republican idiom in which the two predecessor discourses reinforced each other' (86). In this new republican idiom, luxury is transformed from being the enemy of liberty into the motor of the economic growth that makes liberty possible.

For Hont, it is a mistake to think that Smith ignored political philosophy, properly so called, in favour of a history of society and of government.<sup>17</sup> Smith had a political theory, and that political theory was republican in character. But what does that mean, exactly? What kind of republicanism are we talking about here? Hont explains that the important move away from the ancient idea of republicanism was made by Montesquieu, in his division of lawful regimes -- *res publicae* -- into two kinds, 'one based on equality (republics or collectively ruled regimes) and the other based on inequality' (43). 'A *res publica* based on social inequality', Hont continues, 'is what Montesquieu called a monarchy, a vertically stratified republic' (43-4). Rousseau did not believe that republicanism and social inequality could be combined. The second *Discourse*, according to Hont, was written to make it clear that Montesquieu was wrong on just this point. Smith, though, did believe that republicanism and social inequality could be combined --

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<sup>16</sup> Smith's history of ancient politics was never published. Hont 'reconstructs' it from Smith's lecture notes, and here the lack of footnotes is especially regrettable. The reconstruction is similar to what is proposed in 'Adam Smith's History of Law and Government', pp. 155-63.

<sup>17</sup> See 'Adam Smith's History of Law and Government', pp. 137-9.



so long as policies ensuring economic prosperity were in place. But, again, what kind of republicanism is this? Why use that word, instead of, for example, 'liberalism'?<sup>18</sup> There is nothing in this book to compel one to dispense with the usual view of Smith as a sceptic about government's capacity to do much to improve the lives of citizens. Hont, indeed, emphasises Smith's scepticism about large-scale political reform. 'If there ever was an Enlightenment project', Hont says, 'Smith was its committed enemy' (115). As described by Hont, Smith remains a proponent of negative liberty, personal independence, and the protection of property. Perhaps Montesquieu's theory of regime classification made it possible for post-1688 England to be called a republic, but Hont does not make clear what, politically speaking, hangs on this innovative piece of nomenclature. When it comes to Smith's vision of politics in commercial society, a 'new aspect' and 'fresh view' does not quite come into focus.<sup>19</sup> Hont remarks at one point, presumably with historians such as Caroline Robbins and John Pocock in mind, that 'It is a mistake to believe that the great discovery in the eighteenth century was republicanism. No, the exciting thing in the eighteenth century was the modern monarchy as a *res publica*' (77). Exactly what was exciting about this from Smith's point of view is never properly explained.<sup>20</sup>

In Lectures 5 and 6 Hont moves on from the history of government to political economy. It is here that he develops his striking interpretation of Rousseau as not 'a small state virtue fantasist who aspired to be the modern Diogenes and dreamed about a return to the natural goodness of physical man' (122), but, rather, as a proponent merely of balanced growth and the taxation of consumption. Rousseau, according to Hont, was not against foreign trade as such -- 'but he was prepared to abandon it if it became morally poisonous or competitively difficult'. Fundamentally, he was 'a closed commercial state theorist' (124), and this was because disengagement from international competition was the surest way of avoiding the state of war between nations that is endemic to commercial modernity. Smith's recommendation as to how war could be avoided was quite different. The danger for any commercial state was that it would understand its interests to lie in the pursuit of market domination by military means. The criticism of this doctrine in Book IV of *The Wealth of Nations* is well known. The final move in Hont's reading of Smith in *Politics in Commercial Society* is the claim that the attack on mercantilism was paired with a theory of 'international emulation' developed in

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<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that I myself think that Smith can usefully be described as a 'liberal'. The case against the application to Smith of that particular label is comprehensively made by Donald Winch in *Adam Smith's Politics: An Essay in Historiographical Revision*, Cambridge University Press, 1978.

<sup>19</sup> There is no discussion, for example, of the three duties Smith assigns to the sovereign in the system of natural liberty at the end of Book IV of *The Wealth of Nations*; contrast Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Commercial Society in the Scottish Enlightenment*, Edinburgh University Press, 2013, pp. 108-18, and also pp. 172-80.

<sup>20</sup> One possibility here, not canvassed by Hont, is Winch's suggestion of 'parallels', not between Smith and Rousseau, but between Smith and the American Federalists: see *Adam Smith's Politics*, ch. 7.

additions made in the final edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.<sup>21</sup> This theory, Hont says, was an application to the European arena of Rousseau's idea that in a properly organised republic, *amour-propre* would satisfy itself in work. It amounted to a vision of 'constructive and progressive national *amour-propre*', of 'competition without animosity, based on the love of mankind' (124). The hope was that emulation and zeal would replace envy and hatred. Hont claims both that this theory 'was not an optional element of Smith's system' (124) and that it was 'highly problematic' (131). Smith himself admitted that love of mankind was bound to be the loser in a contest with love of country, and that there was no way of restraining emulation from becoming excessive. So the endpoint of Hont's account of Smith is failure. Rousseau, Hont thinks, failed at just the same place. Neither developed a workable theory of how a commercial state might manage itself politically in the world of international competition. '[I]t is not clear,' Hont remarks, 'whether we have gotten that much further' (132).

## 3

Hont says at the beginning of Lecture 1 that his intention is 'to tease apart the different sorts of political vision that are currently relevant to us by using the history of political thought as a guide' (1). He wants to understand Rousseau and Smith 'not just as authors of dead texts'<sup>22</sup> but also as presences in our contemporary theorizing' (24). The issue that, by Hont's lights, is, or should be, of especially pressing concern to us now is what he calls 'state theory'. 'State theory', he laments, 'is still in a muddle' (75). State theory, for Hont as for Quentin Skinner, begins with Hobbes and the distinction between concord and union. But the society for which Hobbes designed his theory of the state was not a commercial society. It was not, in other words, a theory that made room for the kind of liberty which commerce both nurtures and requires. Both Rousseau and Smith wanted, as Hont puts it, 'to keep both liberty and authority in play' (55). Thus *The Social Contract* 'can be described as trying to reinvent Hobbes's state without Hobbes's idea of representative sovereignty'. What was needed was 'a new theory of representation without a unifier and without alienation of sovereignty' -- as well as an economic theory that could prevent luxury from exacerbating *amour-propre* to the point where there was too much inequality for union to be possible (74). The muddle that modern state theory is in begins with the difficulty of seeing how it can be that in Rousseau's republic there is *both* the rule of law *and* the rule of the particular flesh and blood human beings whose wills are somehow bundled together to become the general will. Hont intimates that it is in the work of Sieyès that this difficulty is fully elaborated -- but no reading of Sieyès is offered here.<sup>23</sup> What we are told instead is that 'If one studies the ideological history of

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<sup>21</sup> Hont makes the same claim at the end of the introduction to *Jealousy of Trade*: see pp. 111-25.

<sup>22</sup> It may be that this is a typographical error, and that what Hont said, or meant to say, was 'dead authors of texts'.

<sup>23</sup> For Hont on Sieyès, see *Jealousy of Trade*, pp. 474-92.

our current state form in the West -- the ideological origins of the modern representative and commercial republic -- one can readily see that it is a result of a synthesis between the work of Rousseau and the work of Smith' (24). It is hard to see, though, exactly what Hont thinks Smith brought to the question of how the Hobbesian state might be turned into the state needed by a commercial society.

It is also hard to see how the history of political thought that Hont offers us in *Politics in Commercial Society* might guide us in the teasing apart of the 'different sorts of political vision that are currently relevant to us'. One senses in Hont's work a belief that, in terms of political thought, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were failures. Marxism, in particular, was a disaster, and the liberal tradition stretching, say, from Mill to Rawls was not much an improvement. The fundamental problems of modern politics -- problems generated for the most part by the unavoidable influence upon politics of economics -- were recognised much more clearly by seventeenth and eighteenth-century writers. Those problems were not, of course, solved by seventeenth and eighteenth-century writers, but they were identified and characterised, and so, paradoxically enough, we would do well to look back beyond 1800, to a line of thought that began with Hobbes and ended, roughly, with Kant, for resources with which to think through the political-economic problems that we face today. The editors of *Politics in Commercial Society* explain that Hont 'thought of himself first and foremost as a political theorist' -- 'although', they rather unnecessarily add, 'not of the formal or analytical kind'. 'He was convinced ... that modern political theory could move forward only by paying careful attention to the ideas of the best commentators on past instances of modern society' (xviii). This conviction can be felt in many places in the book. Hont says at one point that eighteenth-century conjectural history is 'moral and political philosophy presented in a historicized form' (43), and one imagines that he would allow that the same could be said of his own accounts of the intellectual development of Rousseau and of Smith. The difficulty faced by the reader is that Hont is never explicit about what his political philosophy is, nor about how he thinks modern political theory might be moved forward by a better understanding of political theory written three hundred years ago. History here is not mere history, that is plain, but one is left guessing what else it is.

I will end, then, with a guess. I think that what Hont was interested in as a political theorist was problems, not solutions to problems. It was not that the theorists of the past knew the answers to the political questions posed by the rise of modern commerce, that those answers had been unfortunately forgotten, and that they needed to be remembered. Rather, the theorists of the pasts identified problems that were later forgotten because they were assumed to have been solved, that history has shown were not solved, and that are now very much our problems once more. What history enables us to do, in other words, is to understand better the predicament that we are in. What, if anything, will lead us out of the predicament is another matter entirely. This is why, perhaps, there is no detailed account of the content of Smith's vision of politics in a commercial society in Hont's book, nor anything resembling a full-scale interpretation of

*The Social Contract.*<sup>24</sup> It was the questions that Smith and Rousseau took themselves to have to answer that mattered. Of first importance among those questions was how, given the many and various pressures exerted by a developed system of international commerce, the state could play its Hobbesian role as what unifies a country's people and protects the people from each other and from external aggression. The treatment of Smith's concept of 'competition without national animosity' in lectures 5 and 6 is suggestive -- but no more than suggestive -- of an interest on Hont's part in the range of answers given to that question by the theory and practice of the European Union. Rousseau's scepticism about cosmopolitan politics might be read as prefiguring the answer of those who want now to give up on the EU project altogether. With Hont's help, we might be able to see that project not as the megalomaniac delusion of Brussels-based bureaucrats, but as a possible solution to a problem that Europe has been facing for 300 years. But as I say, that is just a guess as to what Hont might have had in mind when he spoke of the current relevance of the history of political thought.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Hont claims that 'In the book on Poland, more than anywhere else, it becomes clear what Rousseau's alternative to Montesquieu's monarchy was' (120)

<sup>25</sup> For comments on an earlier draft of this review, I am grateful to Richard Bourke, Robin Douglass, Aaron Garrett, Charles Griswold, and Richard Whatmore. For additional help, thanks to Béla Karposy.