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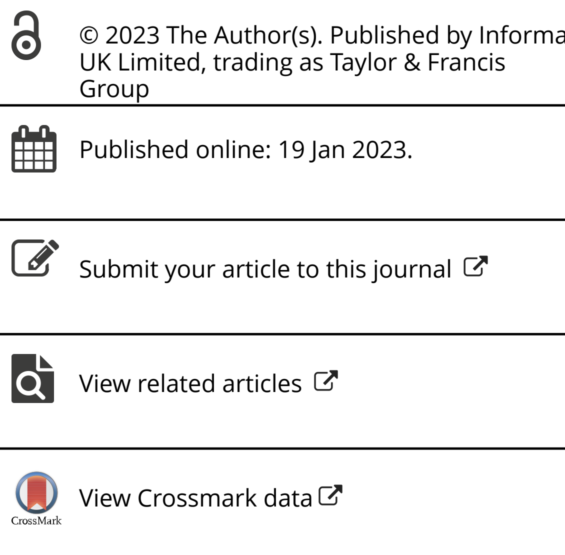

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Liberalism and republicanism, or wealth and virtue revisited

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ABSTRACT
The unquestionable achievement of J. G. A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* was to describe the retention of pre-modern values in a modern society. Pocock was notoriously accused of decentring Locke and side-lining the Liberal Tradition. A more pertinent critique had it that he failed to articulate how civic humanism in the context of increasingly commercial societies produced more than Jeremiahs or Cassandras. This article explains how Pocock responded to his various critics by inventing the term "commercial humanism" in an effort to clarify the way in which classical virtue was modified in modern commercial contexts, especially by natural jurists and republicans. Commercial humanism proved controversial but stimulated one of the most original scholars working in the history of political thought, István Hont, to undertake a prolonged engagement with Pocock's revisionist ideas, which ultimately allowed him to answer Pocock's critics better than Pocock, whose voice remained too in tune with those whose view of modern political thought he had rejected. For Hont, Pocock's labours in the history of political thought remained less relevant to present politics than they might become, once the depth of eighteenth-century analyses of the relationship between wealth and virtue was recovered.

KEYWORDS
republicanism; liberalism; political economy; István Hont; J. G. A. Pocock; commerce

1. Introduction

Among the most significant developments in the history of political thought in the post-World War Two era was the revival of the term "civic humanism," also called the commonwealth or classical republican tradition, stretching, it was asserted, from Aristotle, Fortescue and Machiavelli, to Milton, Harrington and English republicans, to Whigs such as Trenchard and Gordon, Catharine Macaulay and Richard Price and, ultimately, to the Founding Fathers, including Thomas Jefferson.[1] Although the terms originally came into circulation by way of a number of German scholars and political thinkers, including, most notably, Hans Baron and Hannah Arendt, by far the greatest contribution to the revitalisation of the civic humanist/republican tradition, J.G.A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), for a time made the history of political thought both vibrant and vital as a field, with implications far beyond the community of

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historians.[2] Pocock charted the crisis of republics struggling to maintain themselves and the challenges they faced after their creation from the Renaissance to civil war England and on to the United States.

Pocock recognised that he was doing something different from Hans Baron, Bernard Bailyn and Caroline Robbins, especially when he was writing the final chapters of *The Machiavellian Moment* and altering entirely his perspective upon the eighteenth century. He had already concluded that the century was marked by being "saddled with [a political] language that defined value as static and history as necessarily involving movement away from it."[3] He had a further revelation, however, he informed his friend Quentin Skinner, while reading Daniel Defoe; it was that a non-Marxist critique of capitalism/commercial society could be derived from the identification of commerce with the inconstant goddess Fortuna:

> All this [revision] was blown open by my discovery, in working through things like Defoe's *Review* [*of the Affairs of France*, 1704–1713] in search of origins for the Court thesis, of a presentation of Credit (public paper credit) as an inconstant female figure and irrational historical dynamic, unmistakeably none other than Fortuna (and to a lesser degree Fantasia) under a new name. So I had to rewrite my whole interpretation of the debate under William and Anne, using the title 'Neo-Machiavellian political economy' and arguing for an eighteenth-century version of the 'Machiavellian Moment' in which (1) the virtue-fortune-corruption pattern is repeated as virtue-commerce-corruption (2) early capitalism is apprehended, in a thoroughly un-Lockean and un-Macphersonian way, under the paradigm of credit-fantasy-passion-honour, so that an eighteenth-century version of false consciousness appears and we get the beginning of the sort of thought later to become Marxian.[4]

Put simply, Pocock had discovered a way of thinking about commerce, commercial society and the rise of capitalism in non-Marxist but historically plausible ways. This was a coup, chiming with the historical and political interests of those with whom Pocock had worked closely for many years, especially Quentin Skinner and John Dunn. The search was for an alternative to the Marxism of the 1960s and 1970s that enabled people to talk about capitalism, but not socialism, liberalism or communism at the same time. In other words, among intellectual historians, there was an ongoing interest in defining capitalism historically rather than filtered through the lens of twentieth-century politics and political ideologies. Looking back on his book a few years later, Pocock repeated the story to his friend, the Edinburgh historian Nicholas Phillipson, who had mentioned to Pocock that he was working on Defoe:

> Defoe – I didn't know how to finish the thing [*The Machiavellian Moment*]; was stuck with 13 chapters and was meditating a footnote saying that only the followers of Leo Strauss would know what that meant. Then I read lots of the Review, discovered Credit = Fortune, and suddenly saw the whole Virtue-Commerce thing open up before me (in 2 extra chapters). After all Defoe invented the division of labour – in the inexact sense.[5]

Pocock's modern civic humanists were concerned about the collapse of morality, the separation of the human personality into unstable components, the corruption of governments addicted to the pursuit of revenue and of ministers obsessed with their own wealth. Above all, however, they were adjusting to a world in which reason of state dictated that *virtù* had to be preserved from the effects of commerce and public debt. Members of society, whether lowly or great, single-mindedly pursued luxury and the

satisfaction of their selfish passions, and statesmen whose policies were governed by militaristic concerns sought to increase their own power together with that of the nation.

These civic humanists or republicans, termed by Pocock neo-Harringtonians and neo-Machiavellians, sought to defuse the threats faced by a corrupt commercial society, offering various political alternatives founded upon more stable forms of social interaction, less reliant upon the passions. Yet two problems remained that were hard to resolve, highlighting deep ambiguities in modern republican discourse. The first was the transition mechanism, capable of moving from a society characterised by corruption into one in which virtue in the form of civility and polite manners predominated. The second was the recognition that commerce was necessary for the survival of the nation. Without a republic there could be no virtue, but without commerce there could be no republic. The problem was how to reconcile the two. Republicans could not turn their backs upon commerce or consider wealth the enemy of virtue. The civic humanist language had to adapt itself accordingly.

When writing the final chapter about the Americanisation of virtue, Pocock placed "Jeffersonian classicism and messianism together under the same Machiavellian-Harringtonian umbrella." This allowed him to make evident "the American problem of the retention of pre-modern values in a post-modern society."[6] It did not, however, enable him to articulate how civic humanism produced more than Jeremiahs or Cassandras, cynics identifying the malaise but lacking remedies beyond a general lament for the loss of classical virtue and the decline from ancient to modern times.

This article explains how Pocock responded to his various critics by inventing the term "commercial humanism" in an effort to describe anew the relation between commerce and virtue, between jurisprudence and civic humanism. Pocock's intention was to clarify the way in which classical virtue was modified in early modern/modern commercial contexts. The term "commercial humanism" proved controversial, but it generated considerable discussion and stimulated one of the most original scholars working in the history of political thought, István Hont, to undertake a prolonged critical engagement with Pocock's revisionist ideas. This ultimately allowed Hont to respond to Pocock's critics in a more convincing fashion than Pocock himself. For Hont, Pocock's remained a voice too in tune with those whose view of modern political thought he had rejected. As such, Pocock's analyses of the history of political thought remained less relevant to present politics than it might become, once the depth of eighteenth-century analyses of the relationship between commerce and virtue was recovered.

2. Liberalism and Scotland

Pocock ultimately described his *The Machiavellian Moment* as a species of "tunnel history."[7] In other words, republicanism was a continuous tradition but also just one tradition in a broader intellectual landscape; there was plenty of room for alternative and related traditions/languages of politics either surviving into the present or disappearing into the past. One such tradition was that of the Ancient Constitution, of which Pocock was equally the foremost authority.[8] Another was Quentin Skinner's reconstruction, as Pocock described it, of the scholasticism/populist tradition.[9] Pocock's emphasis upon plurality in his own commentary upon *The Machiavellian Moment* was received as a welcome clarification by many readers; initially a vitriolic response had come from

those who saw Pocock as having grossly exaggerated the continuity of civic humanism from Aristotle to Jefferson, not recognising that modern political thought, rather than experiencing a revival of Aristotelian ideas, essentially constituted a liberal and bourgeois negation of the *polis* and the *zoon politicon*.[10] A related criticism held that Pocock, by extending ancient political notions into the modern context, had crowded out Locke and left too little room for the (liberal) natural law tradition, which many considered (and still do) the foundation of modern political thought.[11] The most hostile responses came from North America, where Locke was not only considered the primary author of the "Liberal Tradition" but was also adopted as an honorary Founding Father, the ultimate intellectual architect of American individualism, property rights and limited government.[12] In numerous accounts emanating from the United States, as J.C.D. Clark explains in this issue, liberalism was perceived to be in glorious battle with classical republicanism/civic humanism.[13] For political philosophers, the debate could be mapped onto a present-day ideological divide, pitting advocates of classical liberalism against communitarians, with the latter appealing to Hannah Arendt for justification in the present and Pocock for history.

Pocock *had* openly argued that Locke was less influential an author than many realised, but his target was not liberalism *per se*. Indeed, in his reconstruction of English republican thought, he had not initially set out to oppose any rival interpretation. This was evident from his first article on Harrington of 1968, in which he recognised C.B. Macpherson's possessive individualism thesis as being compatible with civic humanism.[14] The civic humanist tradition added to the armoury of critiques of commercial society/capitalism. It deepened the meaning of republican liberty by linking it directly to self-rule, arms bearing and freehold land tenures. It did not challenge the existence of liberalism or the commercial ideology of figures beyond the civic humanist paradigm. This was why Pocock resented many of the bricks thrown at him. Locke had not been permanently banished from Pocock's vision of modern political thought. The question was never *if* Locke fitted into these contexts, but *how* he did so.[15] From one perspective, he was straightforwardly describing an ideological language of classical lineage, available to political actors across Europe and the Atlantic world in early modern times that had an enduring legacy in the United States.[16] Nonetheless, Pocock spent the following decade defending himself against charges of leaving no room for the jurisprudential mode of political thought. He eventually came to regret his involvement in the American debate entirely. As he wrote in a foreword written in 1994 for a French translation of his book, the final chapter had merely been "an afterthought" and his intention to provoke had been "too successful for his own comfort."[17]

In the years following *The Machiavellian Moment*, Pocock developed a conciliatory response to many of his critics, emphasising the co-existence and interaction of paradigms, turning the tunnels of political thought into lattices. This was most evident in his support for various Cambridge School reconstructions of the history of philosophy and jurisprudence that might ultimately be called liberal. This was the achievement, he wrote in 1983, of scholars including Duncan Forbes, Quentin Skinner, Peter Stein, Richard Tuck and James Tully, whom he collectively termed "the second 'Cambridge paradigm'."[18] If the first, Pocock's own, focused on "virtus" and the relation between persons, the second derived from the study of "ius," being concerned with "the possession, distribution and administration of things." Jurisprudence, "with its inbuilt concerns

for *meum et tuum* and for *suum cuique*," became "the fundamental expression of possessive individualism," as individuals were defined by their property transactions. According to Pocock, this distinction facilitated a readily graspable division between liberal and republican traditions:

> The child of jurisprudence is liberalism, in which the disjunction between individual and sovereign remains, no matter how close the two are brought to one another; whereas republican virtue pertains immediately to the individual, not as proprietor or rights-bearer but as citizen, sharing self-rule among a number of equals without the need of any prior translation.[19]

However, while he stretched out an appeasing hand to the jurisprudential paradigm of the Cambridge school, his response to other critics became more hostile and irreconcilable. Pocock became more confident in challenging the conventional view that that modern commercial ideology emerged "from the political and epistemological individualisms of Hobbes and Locke." This view he associated not only with C.B. Macpherson, who used the term "bourgeois" "in and out of season," but also with "a series of neo-classical and neo-Aristotelian schools, on the whole conservative and varyingly linked with the names of Arendt, Strauss … Voegelin and Wolin."[20] For Pocock, it now made sense to lump together critics of contemporary politics who equated modern politics with the rise of individualism and narrow self-interest. They were, in Pocock's words, "nineteenth-century romantics."[21] Despite his encomiums of Arendt's thought, Pocock believed it was possible to go beyond this "romantic" rejection of capitalism, finding ways in which commerce and liberty could be seen healthily to co-exist. The reason was his identification of what he began to term "commercial humanism," which was a direct result of his further engagement with Scottish jurisprudence, in his attempt to accommodate and reconcile his own position with that of the second Cambridge paradigm. Scotland became a focus for Pocock as he moved to Johns Hopkins and planned the redefinition of British political thought:

> Princeton is about to publish my book on The Machiavellian Moment, whose effective range is really from Boethius to Tocqueville; and I hope to finish with Harrington in weeks rather than months. It was because these two ten-year projects were just about done that I thought it made sense to move to Hopkins, where I'm planning to begin planning for a comprehensive history of British political thought. This will endeavour to branch out from political theory into history and literature, and from English thought into Scottish, Irish, American and Other.[22]

More than the debate about America, it was the debate about the implications of civic humanism in the Scottish Enlightenment context that caused Pocock's position to evolve and become more defined – or redefined – in relation to the eighteenth century. Duncan Forbes, then reader in history at the University of Cambridge, played a key role in Pocock's re-evaluation of his ideas about civic humanism in Scotland.

3. The importance of Duncan Forbes

Forbes's critique of Pocock can be charted by examining his correspondence with Donald Winch, who, as professor of economics at the University of Sussex, approached Forbes by letter in April 1975. Winch reported that he had been introduced to the civic humanist interpretation by Quentin Skinner whilst they were colleagues at Princeton's Institute of Advanced Study. Winch's initial response was entirely positive:

> When I came here [to Princeton] to spend my sabbatical year away from Sussex my intention was to begin work on a collaborative enterprise with my colleague, John Burrow, with a view to writing a book on some selected themes in the history of the social sciences. For obvious reasons this meant returning to the Scots, and since I am a historian of economic thought by trade, to Smith in particular. Much of the ground is already well-tilled, and it was with some relief that I took up some suggestions made by Quentin Skinner, one of my temporary colleagues here. This entailed doing some reading in the fairly recent literature on civic humanism and the concept of virtue and corruption. I was familiar with your own account of Ferguson on virtue, and some of the other literature on the theme of 'alienation' in Scottish writings, but I had never understood the *system* of republican ideas to which the ideas of 'corruption' and 'virtue' belonged.[23]

Winch declared that, "fired with enthusiasm," he had begun work on a re-reading of Adam Smith in the light of "the civic humanist tradition." Winch's hope was that it might supply "a welcome alternative to the dominant liberal capitalist perspective on Smith which stretches from Locke and Hobbes on the one side to Marx and Mill on the other." Winch was sure that, by drawing upon such work as Pocock's, and by applying it to the case of Smith, more complicated stories about "the relationship between polity, economy and society" could be formulated.[24]

Forbes's response to *The Machiavellian Moment* was hostile, lamenting the fact that the natural jurisprudence tradition – his own "patch of soil" – had been poorly attended to by Pocock.[25] Forbes advised Winch,

> don't sell yourself to the 'civic humanism' business. John Pocock used to have a bee in his bonnet about it. I am prepared to do so, provided lots and lots of other bees are given total license to buzz also.[26]

Forbes called himself a "pointilliste," and used this term to criticise the notion that it was possible to identify and isolate political languages over time. As he put it to Winch, "the 'civic humanism' in the context of Smith, Ferguson and whomsoever *becomes* something else again. That is why I am so suspicious of 'traditions' of thought." Yet, Forbes's book on Hume of 1975 itself charted the evolution of the tradition of toleration-oriented natural jurisprudence in the aftermath of the wars of religion and Hume's consequent debt to Grotius, Pufendorf, Carmichael and other exponents of "a modern theory of natural law."[27] Forbes's response to Pocock was the same as those who perceived themselves to be working within liberal or Marxist traditions in North America and elsewhere: that Pocock was suffocating alternative interpretations of eighteenth-century politics. However much he called himself a pointilliste, for Forbes it was a fact that natural jurisprudence was "the matrix of the social theory of the Scottish Enlightenment."[28]

Pocock was fully aware of Forbes's critique. At the close of 1979, he reported receiving "two relatively crazy letters from Duncan [Forbes], one prophesying revolution against something he calls 'the Pocockian hegemony', the other telling me that I could never understand the extreme insecurity of his position amid a ring of foes."[29] Pocock denied that he was limiting anyone or seeking intellectual empire, stating to Nicholas Phillipson that "I replied that I hoped he would soon relieve me of the extreme embarrassment of supposing there was any such thing as this hegemony." Further, Pocock agreed that, at the next gathering of the tribes at Cambridge in 1980, he and Quentin Skinner would "make a resolutely eirenic effort to accommodate the civic humanist and natural law interpretations, which indeed don't strike me as in any way

incompatible."[30] Scholars were travelling to events arranged under the auspices of the King's College Cambridge research project "Political Economy and Society, 1750–1850," organised by István Hont and Michael Ignatieff from 1979 to 1983. It was here that Pocock circulated a conciliatory model, published in 1981, which suggested a path forward toward some kind of accommodation between the language of rights and the language of virtue.[31]

Pocock's model saw the two modes of political thought co-existing as separate but not incompatible languages. They were irreducible to one another but nonetheless overlapping *via* a shared preoccupation with "manners," coalescing into "commercial humanism," a term which encompassed the *study* of manners (natural jurisprudence) and the *practice* and *refinement* of manners (civic humanism).[32] For Pocock, ideas about virtue were not static. As civic humanists/classical republicans adapted to the new commercial environment of the eighteenth century, virtue could be seen to transform into less austere versions of itself and be conceived instead in terms of more polished sentiments, such as politeness and civility. The political aspect of ancient virtue thereby gave way to the social to some extent, but not in the reductionist way of those who understood the rise of the social as being signified by the emergence of possessive individualism and narrow self-interest. Rather, the eighteenth-century had been "made to proliferate with alternatives to ancient *virtus* and *libertas*"; it became vital to map relationships anew.[33] Thus, if virtue persisted into the modern world, transformed by its encounter with commerce into softer, civil, non-classical alternatives, the jurisprudential paradigm now remained prominent in Pocock's model as "the social science of the eighteenth century, the matrix of both the study and the ideology of manners."[34] In exchange for this proposed pluralism, however, Pocock demanded that this concession be reciprocated. No longer could the history of jurisprudence be traced without recognition of "its ideological need to defend commerce against ancient virtue."[35] This was the essence of "commercial humanism," the eighteenth-century rejection of the politics of the ancients in favour of the shift to the social in the sense of polite manners.

The model thus marked a shift in tone from that of *The Machiavellian Moment*. In that book, Pocock had emphasised the contradictory aspect of the Scottish school, noting that "it did not have a final answer to the problem of personality and society – but neither was it strongly marked by a tragic sense of historical contradiction."[36] For Pocock, this lack of tragic awareness meant that it was Adam Ferguson and Rousseau who, Cassandra-like, got the last laugh, in the sense that they, and Rousseau especially, "dramatically and scandalously pointed out a contradiction that others were trying to live with."[37] This acquiescence to Rousseau's stance, however, echoed the interpretations of his neo-classical and Marxian critics, whose perspective upon seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought Pocock was increasingly intent on refuting.

In 1981, therefore, Pocock argued more confidently that a "commercial humanism had been not unsuccessfully constructed." Against those who equated Scottish jurisprudence with a narrow rights-based defence of commercial society, Pocock maintained that "the defence of commercial society, no less than the vindication of classical virtue, was carried out with the weapons of humanism." So long as virtue was understood as the practice and refinement of manners, commerce and rights became means to the maintenance of virtue in the eighteenth century.[38] Commercial humanism was thus responsive to the new world of transactional relations and the diversified personality, but

without embracing the corruption/alienation of the passive pursuit of passions. It provided a humanist justification of commercial society in which politeness and moral sentiment might harness the more socially corrosive passions, making it akin to Albert Hirschman's *doux commerce* thesis about liberalism before capitalism.[39]

> The effect was to construct a liberalism which made the state's authority guarantee the liberty of the individual's behaviour, but had no intention whatever of impoverishing that behaviour by confining it to the rigorous assertion of ego-centered individual rights. On the contrary, down to at least the end of the 1780s, it was the world of ancient politics which could be made to seem rigid and austere, impoverished because underspecialised; and the new world of the social and sentimental, the commercial and cultural, was made to proliferate with alternatives to ancient virtus and libertas.[40]

Commercial humanism was thus a tension-laden discourse of modernity whose origin was characterised by a complicated discontinuity with classical aversions towards commerce and whose nineteenth-century fate was marked by an equally complicated discontinuity with liberalism and a sudden reversal of humanist strategies regarding commerce. The marriage between humanism and commerce quickly came undone, according to Pocock, who held that the change could be traced to the period following the French Revolution:

> about 1789, a wedge was driven through this burgeoning universe, and rather suddenly we begin to hear denunciations of commerce as founded upon soullessly rational calculation and the cold, mechanical philosophy of Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, and Newton. How this reversal of strategies came about is not at present well understood.[41]

4. Pocock, Phillipson and commercial humanism

The influence of Pocock's model can be gauged from the volume of articles resulting from the Kings College project, published in 1983 as *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*. It constituted a state-of-the-field attempt to assess the degree to which civic humanism had influenced Scottish legal philosophy; how it had shaped political economy and how it had offered solutions to problems rather than being a literature of jeremiad. From one perspective, it exemplified Pocock's vision of harmonious co-existence between those who emphasised civic republicanism and those who were on the jurisprudence side of the divide. Nicholas Phillipson, author of a chapter revealingly entitled "Adam Smith, civic moralist," was of this opinion, as he explained in a letter to Winch. He had been reflecting on the division, he informed Winch, while in Dumfriesshire at a "very chilly but very pleasant weekend at Steven Runciman's," where he found himself "thinking again about legislators and citizens and the natural law/civic humanist problem." The solution Phillipson said he realised "more and more, is that John P[ocock] is quite right. There isn't a serious problem here and if I'm right, a sensible civic humanist reading will take care of the natural law problem on the way." The issue for every author was how to adapt inherited philosophies to the circumstance of contemporary commercial society. This meant that a variety of civic humanist responses to new challenges was the stuff of the political thought of the century:

> The classical republicans after all were concerned with community, virtue and the abuse of political power and their problem was to know how to construct a constitution which would

> release the virtue of its citizens and preserve their collective interests. Now that is certainly what the Union debate was about – particularly in its latter stages when the free trade – free parliament deal was on the table. And the assumption was that there were all sorts of modes of participation – economic, cultural as well as political which would do the trick. But what happens when you turn from the question of the abuse of power to the use of power and to the construction of legislation which will help to maximise the happiness and virtue of individual citizens. Now that problem begins to become acute once you have a conception of politics that says that modern polities are large, complex and pluralistic and cannot possibly give access to the political process by all those who clearly belong to a citizen class. What is more, the problem becomes more acute once you realise that the modes of participation which shape the moral personalities of citizens and work for the happiness of a country at large are infinitely more complex than anything the classical republicans ever dreamed.[42]

Phillipson's conclusion was that natural law discourse "was radically adapted to cope with the problems the Scots' curious exploitation of the civic tradition had exposed." The Scots "saw that the moral history of a polity could be written in terms of participation in a political and para-political sense of the word." This explained "how ordinary men and women came to acquire ideas of propriety and even of virtue." Natural jurists could not, however, explain "how the public affairs of that polity could best be regulated." The Scottish achievement was to have "transformed the civic model and in doing so developed an understanding of propriety which was a precondition for any genuinely sociological understanding of the structure of a polity and of human nature."[43] The Scots faced a special situation because they lost their liberty and independence at the Union, yearned for lost virtue yet embraced commercial society as a necessity in order to preserve their nation if not their state. Phillipson noted the challenge of republicans such as Adam Ferguson as portrayed by David Kettler, for whom natural jurists such as Hume and Smith were turning themselves into quietists, accepting the tragedy of the present without doing anything about it.[44]

If Phillipson emphasised coherence, most of the chapters in *Wealth and Virtue* had little or nothing to say about civic humanism, being largely concerned with the influence of natural jurisprudence in Scotland, with chapters on the influence of Pufendorf's theory of commerce by Hont, the eighteenth-century rejection of Locke (and *vice versa*) by John Dunn, James Moore and Michael Silverthorne on Gershom Carmichael's natural jurisprudence and David Lieberman on Lord Kames's jurisprudence.[45] The central figure in the book was Adam Smith and here there was disagreement. On one side stood Hont, with the jurisprudential interpretation of Smith's thought in an exposé of how political economy evolved out of the natural law tradition. At the opposite pole was Phillipson's civic moralism.[46] John Robertson argued that civic humanism played a major role in Scotland but faced difficulties because of the economic crisis following the Darien failure and the abolition of the parliament at the Union.[47] Donald Winch was in the middle, with a chapter whose title spoke volumes, "Adam Smith's 'enduring particular result'"; Winch was no longer persuaded of the efficacy of civic humanism as an interpretative framework and was becoming more of a pointilliste like Forbes.[48]

By 1983, Pocock was moving on as well, possibly somewhat disappointed in the result and realising how difficult it was to equate eighteenth-century authors with political languages. Perhaps he was becoming something of a pointilliste too. In an early letter to Phillipson, he had expressed concerns about the content of what would

become *Wealth and Virtue*, noting: "if they've left you out I think you should congratulate yourself."[49] Phillipson too said he was being "a bit stinky with H[ont] + I [gnatieff] too – with H because he wants to turn my paper into a monument of early 20th century German (or perhaps modern Hungarian) scholarship."[50] Phillipson was making the claim that propriety replaced arguments about virtue in the eighteenth century. Pocock was not so sure and described himself as perplexed by his studies of the critics of republicanism/civic humanism. He was having difficulties with Josiah Tucker, the Dean of Gloucester, indefatigable polemicist, controversialist and essayist, and also with Edmund Burke:

> Tucker says the polis was a master-slave world and that social morality is possible only in a world where people recognise one another's diversities and inequalities in relations of exchange. But he has no equivalent for 'empathy' that I can see, and merely says that all republicans are arrogant slavemasters. (He doesn't talk about 'honour' either, which differentiates him from Burke in the Reflections, who does seem to be saying that chivalric honour is still needed to civilise commercial exchange; a singularly un-Whiggish doctrine and I wonder what they thought of their Lord Rector at Glasgow.[51]

Smith was a challenge, too, and Pocock admitted to being unhappy with Phillipson's interpretation at the same time, as he could not find an alternative to it:

> If Smith – a serious professor of moral philosophy – is trying to equate propriety/virtue with anything of the order of sympathy/empathy, then I'd expect to find somewhere in the canon a serious consideration of Aristotelian equality in confrontation with Aristotelian magnanimity, intended as a critique of classical citizenship and virtue, the argument being either that equality is magnanimity in disguise and the polis a world of dependencies, or that the presence of equality in ancient ethics means that they had escaped from the world of dependencies by moving towards *either* citizenship *or* commerce *or* both. Does he ever do this, or does he just bypass the polis altogether? I suppose this takes me back to my starting point, which is that I'm not quite sure how far you mean that Smith is actually employing the concept of empathy.[52]

In that same letter to Phillipson, Pocock confessed to being fascinated by Edward Gibbon's subversion of standard argumentative tropes:

> I've become seized by the notion that Gibbon, being the kind of historian he is, uses Scottish & often speculative historiography to construct ironies rather than regularities; e.g. liberty in combination with superstition, where according to the book they shouldn't mix.[53]

A more specific and localised contextual approach to individual actors in national or regional contexts became Pocock's approach through Gibbon, far removed from jurisprudential or republican paradigms and emphasising instead a multitude of languages in which theology played a more prominent role. "Commercial humanism" as a category was abandoned in favour of "enlightenments," the varied attempts to prevent war from breaking out within and between mainly monarchical states in the aftermath of the treaties of Utrecht in 1713/1714.[54] Gibbon's was what Pocock termed a "Conservative enlightenment," justifying the rise of pacific commerce and fostering an "Arminian trinitarianism capable of Socinian leanings in which sociability takes the place of grace and Christ's humanity increases relative to his divinity."[55]

The great challenge to the existence of such an enlightenment, as well as to "commercial humanism," was the degree to which commerce in the eighteenth century could be

seen as a promoter of peace at all. While commerce might soften the manners of individuals and generate polite modes of social existence, the problem was that the same could not be said about the relations between states competing for each other's markets. The world of neo-Machiavellian political economy, which Pocock had been the first to count among the modern adaptations of civic humanism, provided a jarring contrast to the supposedly pacific discourse of "commercial humanism." This raised questions about the identity and coherence of Scottish political economy, particularly. In the *Machiavellian Moment*, Pocock had provocatively commented that neo-Machiavellian political economy constituted "the first chapter in the history of political economy," which was also "a further chapter in the history of civic humanism."[56] The scholar who engaged most critically with Pocock's claims was István Hont, feeling that Pocock's story was not yet right.

Much of Hont's work from this period remained in manuscript. It was, nevertheless, influential when it appeared in published form or through Hont's involvement in an array of projects and events intensively through the 1980s and 1990s. Hont was, equally, a significant inspiration for a generation of senior scholars who published far more than he did, including Gregory Claeys, John Dunn, Gareth Stedman Jones, Michael Sonenscher, Keith Tribe and Richard Tuck.

5. Hont's rejection of "commercial humanism" for "civilisation"

In an unpublished manuscript of the early 1980s, Hont began to question Pocock, noting that "What seems to be missing are the hard edges of the discourse of 'commercial humanism'."[57] Hont had little doubt that "commercial humanism" was synonymous with political economy and he speculated that Pocock had resorted to this artificial term to "unburden the discussion" of "unwanted meaning and connotations" acquired by the term political economy since the eighteenth century. Pocock's move, however, made political economy unrecognisable. Furthermore, Pocock had run into the problem of how to relate this discourse to what came before and what came after the Scottish Enlightenment.

> In the debates of the past few years, discussion got bogged down repeatedly by encountering two persistent and interrelated difficulties. It was impossible to reach a working arrangement on what, in the contexts of the 17th, 18th and early 19th-centuries should be legitimately called political economy, i.e. what is the historical identity of political economy, and partly as a consequence of this, but only partly, those who were interested in such problems also could not agree either on the intellectual procedure which would show up political economy as a derivative of natural law or the derivative of what John Pocock calls 'civic humanism'.[58]

The revisionist debate which Pocock had initiated was dissolving into a custody battle over political economy, incorporating a counter-custody controversy over liberalism.

Hont's follow-up project to *Wealth and Virtue* was revealingly called "The Identity of Political Economy." Setting the tone of debate, Hont explained what was wrong with Pocock's model and what ought to replace it. Firstly, it was unclear from Pocock's schema what drove humanist thinkers to reject ancient virtue in favour of commercial society. The concept of "manners" lacked any sense of causal determination and failed to "express fully the centre of gravity in this discourse."[59] Why should anyone choose

modern over ancient virtue and were there alternatives? Instead of "manners" being the unifying category between civic humanism and natural jurisprudence and the ideological core of political economy, Hont proposed instead the concept of "civilisation," a word coined by the French advocate of Physiocracy, Victor de Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau, the author of the *L'Ami des Hommes* (1756), to reveal how to enjoy prosperity as well as morality.

> What I try to suggest is the following. What was defended in 'commercial humanism' against ancient virtue was not simply the humanistic ideal of manners which could be described by the word 'civility', but a more total and causally articulated vision of modernity which can be captured by the key-word, 'modern civilisation', or simply 'civilisation'. This concept can act not only as the carrier of the humanistic moral intent of the discourse, but also encapsulates the causal force dictated by its jurisprudential foundations and, significantly, its historicised theory of the stages of society from rudeness to refinement. This word, or concept, cannot even be imagined or comprehended without the type of historicism present in the 18th-century discourse. For it does not stand alone, it is one of those concepts which gains meaning only if seen together with its mirroring counter-concept. 'Civilisation' always goes together with its contrasting opposite, 'barbarism'. Understood in this way it indeed expresses a stark choice which the concept of manners cannot. What it suggests is that the choice between ancient and modern virtue in the context of the modern commercial society entails a choice between civilisation and barbarism. Thus it is with the help of the concept of civilisation that the defence of modernity *qua* defence can be and in fact has been conducted since the birth of 'commercial humanism'.[60]

The defence of civilisation was the defining characteristic of eighteenth-century political economy. Hont identified his own contribution to *Wealth and Virtue* as showing the truth of this. With Michael Ignatieff as co-author, he had argued that Smith's *Wealth of Nations* was a discourse not about manners but, rather, a defence of modern inequality as superior to the equality of poverty, amounting to a defence of civilisation against barbarism.[61]

For Hont, political economy, being concerned with civilisation, ought not to be equated with the discovery and defence of the market economy. This was the economistic fallacy, which ignored the in-built normativity of the language of political economy. David Ricardo barely qualified as a political economist in Hont's mind, having ignored or taken for granted everything in political economy except the synchronic analysis of markets; Joseph Schumpeter's later *History of Economic Analysis* (1954) had to be dismissed for the same reason.[62] However, political economy could not be conceived without markets at its core either. The latter was the humanist fallacy. The defence of civilisation entailed a defence of markets, but it entailed much more than that. By placing the concept of civilisation at the centre of one's understanding of political economy, it was possible to avoid past interpretive mistakes. It was also possible, Hont emphasised, to avoid the danger of an unstructured "multi-disciplinarity" approach. More positively, he envisaged a "causally linked totality," with civilisation as the organising principle.

> As I have argued the concept of civilisation is precisely the concept which helps us to understand how the various facets of modernity interlink and form a causally determining totality. In this sense, political economy necessarily contains both the historicised scheme which explains us in the language of the twin terms of 'civilisation versus barbarism' what

> modern civilisation is and how it came about and also the anatomy of civilisation in its own synchronic terms, i.e. how it operates and how its operation draws a boundary for human actions, including political actions, which helps us in deciding what course of action helps us to preserve civilisation, or indeed to foster it, and what actions would carry the danger of a relapse into barbarism. It seems to be true that to be a 'true' political economist requires the comprehension of this mutual system of determination and constraints operating in civilisation from both directions, and that is why we still celebrate Adam Smith's achievement. He has done both, not out of ambition of system-building, but by understanding what a serious effort to understand modern civilisation requires from a thinker who cares about causality.[63]

The concept of civilisation brings into clear focus the real division for Hont in modern politics, which was not between left and right, but about those who accepted or rejected modernity. "The real divide," Hont argued, "is between those who try to understand and defend modern civilisation and those who first and foremost are its critics."[64] The political economist was someone who understood this and acknowledged above all else the necessity of preventing projectors and enthusiasts from undermining the progress of civilisation.

> Thus, to be a 'political economist', entails the comprehension, however crudely, that modern civilisation is a system with definite boundaries, the transgression of which, from whatever intentions, can precipitate the system's relapse into barbarism.[65]

Seeing the core concept of political economy as "civilisation" led Hont to define nineteenth-century political economy as an unfolding set of critiques of romantic/utopian thinking. This is evident from unpublished writings on Malthus and Marx, in which Hont portrayed them both as defenders of civilisation. In the case of Malthus, political economy was the search for a scientific refutation of the utopianism of Condorcet and Godwin. This drove Malthus towards a reductionist theory of human needs, which demonstrated with as much certainty as possible that, in attacking civilisation, the utopians would create a world of universal misery. The defence of civilisation was of greater importance to Malthus than the influence of Country politics and support for England's landed aristocracy.[66] In the case of Marx, Hont stressed the anti-utopian and anti-socialist aspects of Marx's historical materialism, seeing him as a defender of civilisation against rights-based utopias advocating communal property. Rejecting all forms of "positive community" as detrimental to the progress of civilisation, the communism that Marx had envisioned as the culmination of history was instead conceived as a return to the "negative community" of the natural lawyers, rendered possible by the technologically determined production of material superabundance.[67]

Hont's analysis of political economy also spurred an enduring interest in Rousseau's critique of modern civilisation as failing to create moral improvement. Rousseau thereby suggested a distinction between "civilization" and "culture," between outward progress and inner moral development, that subsequently became constitutive of much German political thought, especially through Immanuel Kant, and which ultimately travelled to Britain and reinforced that sudden reversal of strategies within humanist thought which Pocock had found it so difficult to account for. What had hitherto been understood by Hume and Smith as synonymous with civilisation developed into its antonym; humanism switched sides from the defence of commerce and civilisation to becoming largely opposed to both. In the eyes of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for instance, what in the eighteenth century had been "polished" manners were now "varnished,"

characteristic of a populace devoid of inner moral capacity.[68] This reversal, the undoing of "commercial humanism," was a major reason why Smith and Kant were always so important to Hont; both had answered Rousseau's civilisational critique long before the romantic generation entrenched the split in Britain.[69] Smith's and Kant's reconciling of "culture" and "civilisation" was achieved, Hont argued, principally through the employment of the concept of "unsocial sociability" and, once the essential soundness of their responses was recognised, "commercial humanism" again became a potentially more "durable product" than most people – including Pocock – presumed.[70]

> The acceptance of such a divide [between culture and civilization] in historical terms would give credence to Pocock's tentative suggestion that the mantle of humanism has changed hands after the short flowering of 'humanist' political economy in the 18th-century. On the other hand, if we see the two meanings of civilisation as contained within the same discursive space, this would give credit to our assumption that the systematic character of and the extremely sharp choices dictated by the notion of civilisation do not easily allow us to see the connection between the historical and jurisprudential 'base' of the discourse and its humanistic content as a temporary and tenuous one.[71]

It is possible to see Hont's reorientation of "commercial humanism" around the concept of "civilisation" as an attempt to shunt Pocock's narrative onto the track prompted by Forbes, who had questioned Pocock's decision to pivot the narrative of *The Machiavellian Moment* to North America rather than to Germany.[72] Ideally, Pocock should have moved on from Scotland to an explanation of the development of the notion of civil society from Kant to Hegel and to Marx. The North American swerve meant that many references to the humanist origins of Marxism (corruption = alienation) were not followed through. Equally, the suggestion that Smith and Hume were unaware of the contradictions of their own systems regarding personality/society remained unexplored. Hont's point was that, although the concepts of "civilisation" and "culture" might diverge historically, they were not predestined to do so. In fact, the two concepts had a shared conceptual origin traceable to Samuel Pufendorf's concept of *cultura*. It was not necessarily a lost cause to see the tension between them as reconcilable in the ways that Smith and Kant had thought possible. The task of the historian was to keep them both in view, like two sides of same coin, the general discourse of modernity. Above all, it was vital for political theory to avoid developing a Manichean approach to the history of political thought in which the humanist critique of civilisation was treated separately from the defence of civilisation, without reference to the hard choices underpinning modern civilisation. Hont saw Norbert Elias, the sociologist and theorist of civilisation, as a prime exponent of this mistaken approach, embodying a particular German obsession with the dichotomy between "culture" and "civilisation" that "gained currency during and after the First World War."[73] Hont could also have added all of those on Pocock's list of neo-Aristotelians, who asserted the pre-eminence of the ancients over the moderns, philosophy over history and politics over the social. Ultimately, the problem was one of prolepsis, of understanding the eighteenth century through a dichotomy that only appeared towards the end of the period. Pocock, by seeing the essence of Scottish political economy as an unacknowledged tension between personality and society, had fallen into this trap. Smith had been highly aware of the hard choices that his defence of civilisation entailed, and what in hindsight

looked like a contradiction was better understood as a conscious compromise with the constraints of modern civilisation.[74]

Hont, instead, reversed perspective, using the eighteenth-century synthesis as a prism through which to view the fissures of subsequent political thought. The cultural critique of civilisation was the modern child of classical humanism, much as nineteenth-century liberalism was the child of natural jurisprudence; ideally, they needed to be seen as conjoined twins occupying the same discursive space.

6. Political economy and international competition

Hont's political economist was someone aware that civilisation exists within certain boundaries which must not be transgressed. Where did such an awareness come from and when did it emerge? Hont's answer derived from the specific limitations which the growth in international trade placed on modern politics, a subject which led to further engagement with Pocock and the supposed civic humanist origin of political economy. The idea that there were economic limits to politics was emphatically a modern idea and the neo-Machiavellian writers whom Pocock had identified were the first to adapt the civic humanist language to the new commercial reality of international competition.[75] Commerce only became an "affair of state" in the seventeenth century, as Hume wrote in "Of Civil Liberty," and this altered every aspect of politics, leading large states to eat up small states, facilitating the growth of empire, the explosion of debt-funded war and the creation of intranational and transnational corporations and institutions seemingly addicted to the pursuit of empire and war. These bleak facts about the modern condition were often set aside in Hont's opinion, especially by scholars within disciplines that ignored the international realm:

> eighteenth century commerce was not so much gentle, *doux*, but dangerous. The growth of modern civilisation was fraught with difficulties, not just moral, but political and international. This was not an optimistic century, but one that was highly aware of great historical contradictions and of ever-present fragility.[76]

To underline the continuity of his "tunnel history," Pocock had portrayed neo-Machiavellian authors such as Charles Davenant as applying and adapting the classical language of civic humanism to the modern world of trade, war-finance and public debt. In doing so, he saw these innovations as responses primarily to domestic political dangers, emanating especially from the Revolution Settlement, the creation of the Bank of England and the resulting corrupt, credit-hungry Whig ministry of Robert Walpole battling the national debt and Jacobites. The context, in short, was national and predominantly political. What was missing, according to Hont, was a proper understanding of the change in the economic imperatives that had brought about not only these new institutions but also necessitated change within civic humanist thought, the initial reversal of humanist strategies regarding commerce. By seeing neo-Machiavellian discourse as a response to the new cut-throat international competition, as Hont started doing from the mid-1980s, it became clear that it was an Anglo-centric discourse, anchored in the intellectual milieu around the English Board of Trade and preoccupied with the preservation of England's position as a rich nation having to compete with various poorer, more hungry newcomers, whose low wage-costs

were a major competitive advantage and threat to the longevity of every species of national prosperity.

Finding ways of addressing the economic threats faced by rich nations was essential for national survival. Hont pointed out in a talk of 1986, aptly entitled "The Wealth of One Nation and the Dynamics of International Competition," that England had followed both of the two main political solutions advocated by neo-Machiavellian political economy: protectionism and empire-building. When Ireland petitioned for free trade with England after the Glorious Revolution, the request was denied out of a fear of Ireland's superior competitiveness. Davenant, an otherwise staunch supporter of free trade, explained the imposition of controls upon Ireland's commerce as an exception to the general rule rendered necessary by Ireland's ability, as a poor nation with similar natural endowments to the English, to undersell and out-compete English manufactures. As an adjacent dependency, Ireland had to settle for what Hont termed "a sinister sociology of Empire," whereby the Irish had to rely on the wealth of London trickling down, according to Davenant, in various unspecified ways that would benefit the province.[77]

This kind of protectionism, however, only protected England against competition from poor countries over which military dominance could be wielded. A larger threat came from the more developed and sovereign European nations. In the last instance, Davenant argued, England's competitive advantage could only be maintained through the creation of an empire. In the East India trade, he discovered a weapon that was as powerful as it was brutal:

> Davenant discovered a mighty weapon in the English control of the East-India trade. Wages in India were so miserable that their textiles could easily undersell the Europeans even when the cost of transport and other overhead costs were added to their price. By importing them into Europe, England could ruin the textile industries of her competitors, not to mention the useful corruption of their manners by these luxurious imports. There was only one snag. It was impossible to limit the damage caused by these cheap imports to the European and not to the English economy.[78]

To counteract the harm inflicted on England's own industries by its own colonies, Davenant argued against the otherwise popular solution of import controls. In a corrupt nation such as Britain, it was impossible to reduce wages, so that the only long-term competitive solution was to specialise in high-price luxury products and increase the productivity of labour, to facilitate what Hont called an "upward shift in the quality of production to avoid the traps of pure price competition on the lower end of the market."[79] Hont's view in 1986 was that Davenant's strategy had been pursued by Britain up to the post-1945 decolonisation and economic decline of the 1970s and 1980s. The domination of the service sector over the manufacturing sector and of the City of London over the British economy had deep historical roots. Yet the strategy placed onerous demands on the labourer's ability to suffer periods of unemployment and acquire new skills. It was, nevertheless, a price that Davenant had been willing to countenance in order to maintain the competitive advantage that colonial trade provided.

At the core of neo-Machiavellian political economy was a perception of a strong connection between prices and wages as well as of the fact that the rise and decline of nations rested on the political willingness to defend the nation against low-wage competitors.

History provided numerous examples of trading republics whose competitiveness had been undermined by their own commercial success; the neo-Machiavellian political economists believed that the cycle of decline was reversible through pre-emptive political action, legitimised by reason of state arguments. They were neither Jeremiahs nor Cassandras. When transposed to poor countries, as with the Scottish anti-Unionist Andrew Fletcher, the neo-Machiavellian discourse was inverted to guard against the perceived disproportionate advantages of rich nations, whose imperial sword and economic might could always be used to suppress the commerce of weaker nations. Fletcher's solution for Scotland was, not surprisingly, protectionism of various kinds, national as well as federal, foreshadowing J.G. Fichte's later idea of the closed commercial state.[80]

> Recognising the lack of an industrial culture in Scotland and contemplating the failure of Scotland's own colonial experiment at Darien, Fletcher was driven to the idea of a closed commercial state. For him free trade was itself a sort of imperialism, the guaranteed win of the rich over the poor. It was of this debate to which David Hume contributed in his seminal economic essays in the early 1750s. He tried to draw the lesson from both sides of the argument.[81]

Hont's point here was twofold. Perceptions about the inherent bias of free international trade towards rich or poor nations were still very much alive in the 1980s. Cars produced in East Asia were beginning to out-compete North American car manufacturers at home and abroad; suggestions of import controls were presented as a "simple solution." Similarly, calls for protectionism were being heard in the U.K. as part of the Labour Party's *Alternative Economic Strategy* (A.E.S.), the preferred medicine on the left for Britain's economic decline. The reactive nature of these policies demonstrated for Hont the fact that all modern politics operated within limits set by the international economy. The inescapability of economic limitations to politics was most clearly demonstrated in the dire consequences of extreme attempts to wrest back political control of markets; Hont gave, as examples, North Korea and the heterodox Marxist policy of "socialism in one country" in the U.S.S.R. The defence of politics to the point of excluding the market economy came at the expense of modern civilisation.

> While a modicum of political intervention, the rolling back of the economic limits to politics might make sense if prudently applied in a country embedded in an otherwise open world market situation, the pursuing of this defence of politics to the point of the 'closed commercial polity' would show up the real structural constraints and pay-offs following from an artificial isolation from the modern world.[82]

Neo-Machiavellian authors had been acutely aware of such limits to modern politics, and it was in thinking about them that the discourse of political economy progressed from exclusively defending the wealth of one nation *via* reason-of-state policies to defending the wealth of nations/civilisation. The change was noticeable, according to Hont, in the mercantile writer Henry Martyn, author of *Considerations Upon the East India Trade* (1701), and his realisation that the relationship between prices and wages, which had hitherto explained the disadvantage and decline of rich nations, could effectively be severed. The solution lay in the introduction of machinery and the division of labour, as well as by the strategic outsourcing of key industries, such as ship building, to areas of the world with comparative advantages:

> [Martyn's] solution was the division of labour and the use of machines. In this way the displaced labour of old industries could be redeployed without the long time-lag required for their re-training. Anybody could execute the simple actions required by a minutely divided labour process. In order to maximise the advantage of cheap raw materials, Martyn advocated England should build the hulls for its navy and fishing fleet at its Caribbean colonies where cheap timber was available.[83]

This realisation allowed Martyn to see international commerce as a virtue in disguise, weeding out inefficient industries and keeping the rich nation competitive by continuously modernising its industry. This was not, Hont insisted, a narrowly economic response to England's problems. As he wrote in the longer, published version of his paper, entitled "Free Trade and the Economic Limits to National Politics: Neo-Machiavellian Political Economy reconsidered," the issue, for Martyn, was one of "preserving the civilized way of life and material well-being of the majority of the population in the long run," and, as such, this "was to see it just as firmly as a political question."[84] Broadly speaking, this meant that Smith was "quite clearly a disciple of the Martyn, if not the Davenant, school of thought" and thus of the neo-Machiavellian discourse on the preservation of wealth in one nation.[85]

As much as Davenant, Henry Martyn had English concerns; Smith emphatically did not. This was the second point that Hont wished to make, tying this new engagement with Pocock's neo-Machiavellians together with his earlier work on Scottish economic backwardness and the rich country–poor country debate.[86] The economic context of post-Union Scotland was one that proved most beneficial to the further development of political economy, natural since it occupied, as a poor province in a rich country, both positions in the debate about the relative advantages of rich and poor nations. This was the fertile ground in which Hume and Smith developed their ideas about economic development, drawing lessons from each side of the neo-Machiavellian argument as well as joining together natural law and civic humanist concerns in a discourse geared to the defence of modern civilisation.

The peculiar situation of Scotland, its provincial backwardness as well as its heterogeneous combination of lowland merchants and highland clans, was key to the profundity and the cosmopolitan scope of political economy. Just as Smith had drawn inspiration from the civic humanist tradition, absorbing the arguments of the neo-Machiavellian authors, so too could Davenant and Martyn be shown to have drawn inspiration from the work of John Locke, whom Hont, unlike Pocock, found room for among the neo-Machiavellians. Locke was not a theorist of rights and obligations but, rather, a theorist of trade, empire and the division of labour. Hont's point was that the separateness of a republican and a liberal tradition was illusory. The demands imposed by the imperatives of international trade compromised the tunnel-walls of political traditions, which could be reconstructed by the historian of political thought, but which did not correspond to the real historical landscape:

> John Pocock has used the image of lonely tunnel builders to describe the activity of historians aiming to reconstruct the trajectory of particular traditions. He has reminded us that although such tunnels as republicanism, natural law and Christian theology must be bored single-mindedly, one should not mistake the necessities of research for the contours of the real historical landscape. In 'real history', tunnels run parallel and cross or join each other in a bewildering pattern. Pocock himself has been concerned with how research into

> the history of republicanism on the one hand, and natural law on the other, relate to each other. Our present aim is to go even further on this route.[87]

Hont was certain that his approach, seeing the historical landscape as a complex latticework of interrelated ideas, revealed that all modern political thought operated within the same discursive space, defined by the emergence of genuinely international markets in the seventeenth century. From the perspective of the 1980s, by which time the failures of twentieth-century political thought were evident for Hont, it was clear that this would continue to be the case for the foreseeable future. The vision of the modern world was now "resembling that of David Hume's [more] than one would have expected a few decades ago."[88] There was no imminent escape from the economic limitations to modern politics, meaning that relative scarcity would continue to make justice necessary and politics unavoidable. It was illusory to think that politics would eventually be surpassed by an economy of pure *sittlichkeit*; that is, through one of those two escapes that Hume had identified as either extreme abundance, which Hont associated with Marx, or perfect moderation and humanity, which Hont associated with the cultivation of virtue, *doux commerce* and the old liberal dream of a self-organising civil society generating a pacific international order.

Hont was very keen to point out that competing modern ideologies such as Liberalism and Socialism had a common origin in the political economy of the eighteenth century; as such, they should be understood as responses/solutions to the same modern predicament, whether those solutions be empire, free-trade, superabundance, protectionism or more or less extreme versions of the closed commercial state. These modern "idioms of political theory," Hont argued, "are perhaps falsely seen as competitors, rather than variations of the same basic tune regarding the economic limits to politics."[89] Moreover, the fact that these different solutions, associated with competing traditions of political thought, were rarely considered as part of the same discursive space was a result, Hont believed, of the fact that the eighteenth-century awareness of the modern predicament had been lost. He went on to suggest that, "under closer inspection," both Liberalism and Socialism shared "a blindness, perhaps a vested interest in not recognising but deliberately blurring the attempts of defining where the economic limits to politics really lie."[90]

Towards the end of the Cold War, in what was most likely a spoof on the Marxist notion of "permanent revolution," Hont defined the modern predicament as "the permanent crisis of a divided mankind."[91] If there was an approximate end of history – a culmination of civilisation – it would thus not be a negative community of pure *sittlichkeit* but a world in which a divided mankind eventually advanced into developed commercial societies through the respective utilisation of comparative advantages structured by regional differences in culture and natural endowments. Yet the persistent enemy of this moderate utopia was what Hume had called jealousy of trade and Pocock had called neo-Machiavellian political economy. To regain our political composure and theoretical bearing in this "permanent crisis," it was necessary to retreat from Marx and return to eighteenth-century Scotland in order to reconstruct the political and economic vision of Hume and Smith, because they had perceived and theorised better than anyone else the dangers and possibilities of a politics based on international trade, relative scarcity and limited generosity.

7. Retreating from Marx and Marxist historiography

Retreating from Marx meant re-analysing and re-imagining the relation between politics and the economy, which was of course the theoretical upshot of much of the revisionist historiography taking place in and around the King's College seminars of the late 1970s and 1980s. For Hont, however, who was perhaps the foremost expert on Marx in Cambridge at the time, it was also important to bring this retreat to bear on various Marxist debates in which Scottish political economy or Scotland's economic development played a significant role. One key example is the debate about the "development of underdevelopment" thesis of Andre Gunder Frank and other theorists of dependency and unequal exchange such as Immanuel Wallerstein, who rejected the idea that development, especially in former colonised countries of the capitalist periphery, could be understood in terms of universal stages of progress and comparative advantages of trade between rich and poor nations.[92] This was not only a heterodox form of Marxism, rejecting the "optimistic" Marx of *The Communist Manifesto*, but constituted a rejection of all conjectural histories of progress, including that of Adam Smith, whose view of economic development was said to be ignorant of the imbalance of trade between core and periphery nations or regions.[93]

For Hont, it was clear that the Scottish case constituted a problem for dependency theorists, given that Scotland had successfully developed from a position of extreme economic backwardness, despite being lodged at the periphery of England's superior wealth. And Scotland had developed by abolishing its parliament and relying on the reciprocal logic of trade alone.[94] Moreover, Hont wanted to show that there was nothing new about the "development of underdevelopment" thesis; it was known in the eighteenth century in the guise of Andrew Fletcher's political thought and the general neo-Machiavellian discourse on rich and poor nations. Furthermore, the widespread rejection of it by the Scots was due not to ignorance but to a shared understanding of Scotland's situation as a backwards province in a rich (united) kingdom as well as an acute awareness of the general heterogeneity of development, observable not just all around them in Scotland but all over Europe, which they organised into historical stages of development, presupposing the possibility of progress. "Conjectural History," Hont argued, "provided a way of uncovering the hidden linkages between development and underdevelopment."[95] Hont made these points very clearly in an unpublished article from c. 1983, entitled "Conjectural History, Development Theory and the Context of Scottish Backwardness":

> The idea that each form of observable European backwardness epitomized a stage in the progress towards refinement was only plausible on the assumption that developed regions could not hold back the progress of the backward. The idea of progress, in other words, was incompatible with the 'development of underdevelopment'. This idea is not an anachronism; it was fully available to 18th century theory in the discourse on the parasitic effect of overgrown towns on food producing country districts, and in the theories which held that rich countries could indefinitely reproduce their stranglehold over world trade. Hume's theory of the automatic specie flow balancing mechanisms among its many other uses, made a theory of world economic progress conceivable by exploding the notion that one nation could ever engross the commerce of the world. In Book III, Smith's model of the symbiotic inter-dependence of rural food production and urban demand effectively excluded the possibility of a 'development of underdevelopment' thesis in metropolitan-hinterland relations, at least 'in the natural course of things'. Once again, we can see a relation of

> logical necessity between historical and economic argument. Without the 'town-country' and 'rich country-poor country' arguments, it would have been impossible to model world economic development as a progress from one stage to the next.[96]

The Scottish conjectural histories of the natural order of development, meaning the uninterrupted economic order of development, affirmed the possibility of progress and made a theory of global economic development conceivable. However, they did not guarantee it. There were numerous obstacles to economic development resulting from what Smith called the "unnatural and retrograde order of development," which had been forced on Europe by the survival and development of urban society at the expense of agriculture under the aegis of feudalism. Moreover, the economic logic of trade was not self-enforcing and had to contend with the logic of commercial rivalry between belligerent states operating in an international state of nature. For Hont, however, it was important to keep the two spheres analytically separate and not confuse the reciprocal logic of trade with the zero-sum logic of war and politics. In this regard, the theorists of underdevelopment were insufficiently heterodox in their Marxism insofar as they located the cause of dependency in the economic logic of exchange itself rather than in its political subversion; that is, as the result of an inherent inequality in core–periphery trade relationships rather than as the historical legacy of the post-feudal imperial order and the neo-Machiavellian political economy that it gave rise to.

For a more orthodox Marxist such as Robert Brenner, Immanuel Wallerstein and other dependency theorists were, of course, too heterodox in the sense that they sidestepped any exploration of the class-based origin of capitalism in "primitive accumulation" – Marx's term for the violent jolt that set the system of exploitation in motion – equating instead the rise of the capitalist world system with the (merely quantitative) expansion of the market and the international division of labour. Wallerstein and his colleagues were neo-Smithian Marxists, according to Brenner, having adopted wholesale the "commercialisation thesis" of Adam Smith, which was the target of his influential contribution to the so-called "transition debate" about how capitalism emerged out of feudalism.[97] In Hont's view, Brenner's characterisation was wrong for the obvious reason that it was based on a highly simplistic reading of Smith, deliberately ignoring everything beyond Smith's contention in Book I of *The Wealth of Nations* that the division of labour is limited by the extent of the market.[98] There were, of course, numerous other limits to economic development in Smith's book, relating to the historical legacy of feudalism (Book III) and the destructive policies of the mercantile system (Book IV).

> Smith was acutely conscious of the 'discouragements' which a feudal mode of subsistence placed in the way of increasing productivity: the disincentives of servile tenures, the demand for labour services on demesne lands, arbitrary dues, exclusion of land from cultivation by entails and primogeniture, absenteeism, and above all, diversion of capital from investment to conspicuous consumption and warfare. Even when a trade-based division of labour between town and country had induced the commutation of servile dues and the conversion to consolidated tenancies, agricultural output would be held back by the amount of unimproved land held in entail and by the high proportion of cash rents diverted away from agricultural investment into unproductive absentee consumption. These arguments in Book III are ignored by those, like Robert Brenner, who, on the basis of Book I alone, interpret Smith's trade-based division of labour model as a smooth and functional dynamic of rural transformation in response to urban demand. On the contrary, Smith insisted that agricultural output, instead of responding smoothly to urban demand,

> invariably lagged behind it in any society with a traditional social structure. Only in North America, with an agriculture of small proprietors, would agricultural output and urban growth interact in a balanced and self-reinforcing spiral of development.[99]

While North America followed the natural order of development, Scotland's agricultural improvement was hampered by the legal legacy of feudalism, primogeniture and entails in particular, that prevented the large uncultivated estates from being subdivided into more productive units of farming such as the peasant proprietorships in the American colonies. Rather than making development impossible in Scotland, these obstacles simply meant that it happened in a backwards fashion, according to Smith, with agricultural productivity increasing gradually in response to urban demand rather than *vice versa*. Hont found this model plausible as a general description of how development had, in fact, occurred, finding confirmation in the work of Ian Whyte, T.C. Smout and Ian Carter.[100] This meant that the Marxian story of capitalist agriculture needed to be corrected in Scotland, since the consolidation of farms had occurred in response to demand rather than as a precondition of it. Hont singled out Eric Hobsbawm's popular account of Scottish agriculture for special criticism, given that he had not only argued that Scotland constituted an example of "primitive accumulation" but also maintained that Smith and his contemporary reformers had wished drastically to accelerate the process of consolidation as a necessary precondition for improvement.[101] Hobsbawm had thereby made the opposite mistake to that of Brenner: considering the obstacles to development so obvious and overwhelming that the Scottish reformers had resorted *tout court* to "primitive accumulation" in their models of transition; if not in name, then in effect. Hont easily disproved this in regard to Smith: "Far from speaking for a primitive accumulation, Smith endorses the reverse – the superiority of the 'small proprietor' as agricultural improver."[102] The political economy of the unnatural and retrograde order – as Hont later entitled one of his published articles[103] – was far more complex and sophisticated than Hobsbawm's account suggested.

8. Conclusion

It has been shown that Hont's retreat from Marx and his criticism of Marxist historiography was not carried out as a defence of any unproblematic or smooth notion of the rise of international commerce and the problems of reform and transition that this engendered. As with Hume and Smith, Hont's insistence on the essentially reciprocal logic of trade was accompanied by an awareness of the inadequacy of this logic in constraining states from subverting it in their efforts to safeguard their own national wealth, or the wealth of a ruling class, against the pressures of international competition. Hont was never starry-eyed about the end of the Cold War or the transition from a regulated or planned economy to one of free markets. In the early 1990s, he pointed out that this transition was similar to the transition from mercantilism that Smith had envisioned, with all the same pitfalls and dangers.[104]

The economic limits to modern politics were not obvious but asserted themselves though the unintended consequences of the various unfortunate efforts to respond politically to the imperatives of international competition and, ultimately, national survival. John Pocock's pathbreaking work on republicanism and the debates that he inspired

about the identity of political economy had a tremendous influence in shaping Hont's understanding of the commercialisation of Europe and its implications. In particular, Hont's critical engagement with Pocock's neo-Machiavellians from the mid-1980s meant that his retreat from Marx culminated with a vision that in effect inverted, rather than rejected, the Marxist perspective upon the directionality of economic imperatives. The orthodox Marxist theory of imperialism – say, that of V.I. Lenin – saw the imperatives of capitalism emanating outwards from domestic class-struggle *via* the state to the international realm, where the need for new markets (a need driven by domestic overproduction) became the basis for war and empire. This was, in Hont's phrase, "yesterday's theory of imperialism."[105] By contrast, Hont insisted on the primacy of the international realm in generating the economic imperatives of modern politics. The competition among states for survival and sovereignty was a sufficient condition for explaining the commercialisation of Europe as well as the imperatives that led down the various roads of domestic industrial restructuring, protectionism, empire-building and federalism; all of which responses to the permanent crisis of a divided mankind, which continued to define the limits to politics in the present day.

Paul Sagar has convincingly related Hont's outlook on politics and history to the political realism of Judith Shklar and Bernard Williams, designating his political thought as akin to their "Liberalism of Fear."[106] Taming jealousy of trade and avoiding the twentieth-century mistakes in politics and economics remained imperative. As Hont put it in 2005,

> The end of the Cold War, however, has not signaled an end to the incongruence between fixed boundaries of states and the ever-expanding frontiers of the global economy that has upset the modern world order ever since the eighteenth century.[107]

Sagar argues that Hont's bleak view of politics, exemplified in the oxymoronic tension he saw in liberal-egalitarianism, can be read in conjunction with Tony Judt's and Thomas Piketty's claims that the post-War settlement, *Les Trente Glorieuses*, was an anomaly in the larger scheme of history, explicable because of the unique circumstances of post-war Europe. Without contradicting this, it seems important, however, to emphasise that the incongruence between global markets and national politics did not just constitute a danger for Hont but also a continuous challenge to political theory. There was an element of optimism as well as an injunction in Hont's insistence that intellectual history should not look towards the past for "forgotten alternatives whose revival might miraculously answer our problems today."[108] History was a tool for sceptics; its purpose was to help us ask better questions. The list of historical solutions and actual responses to our modern predicament was long and complicated and required, as such, scrupulous study. For better or worse, the list was equally open-ended.

Notes

1. Fink, *The Classical Republicans*, 1945; Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman*, 1959; Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 1967; Wood. *The Creation of the American Republic 1776–1787*, 1972.
2. Sonenscher, "Liberty, Autonomy, and Republican Historiography".
3. John Pocock to Quentin Skinner, 12 October 1972, private papers of Quentin Skinner. We would like to thank Professor Skinner for his singular generosity in allowing us access to his correspondence with John Pocock, and John Pocock for allowing us to cite his letters.
4. Pocock to Skinner, 12 October 1972.

5. Pocock to Phillipson, 22 January 1980.
6. Pocock to Skinner, 12 October 1972.
7. Pocock first employed the term “tunnel history” in a review of Skinner’s *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, published as Pocock, “Reconstructing the Traditions”, and again in Pocock, “The *Machiavellian Moment* Revisited”.
8. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and Feudal Law*.
9. Pocock, “Reconstructing the Traditions”.
10. Andrew, “The Absence of Macpherson and Strauss in Pocock’s *Machiavellian Moment*”.
11. Gibson, “Ancients, Moderns and Americans”; Hulliung, *From Classical to Modern Republicanism.*
12. Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America.* See further Stanton, “John Locke and the Fable of Liberalism”.
13. Clark, “‘Lockeian Liberalism’ and ‘Classical Republicanism’”.
14. Pocock, “Machiavelli, Harrington and English Political Ideologies”, 110–11. For C.B. Macpherson’s theory of the rise of “possessive individualism” during the seventeenth century, see Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*.
15. Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 424.
16. Pocock, “Between Gog and Magog”.
17. Pocock, “Foreword to the French edition of *The Machiavellian Moment*”, 5.
18. Pocock, “Cambridge paradigms and Scotch philosophers”, 248. Pocock referenced Forbes, *Hume’s Philosophical Politics*; Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*; Stein, *Legal Evolution*; Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories*; and Tully, *A Discourse on Property*.
19. Pocock, “Cambridge Paradigms and Scotch philosophers”, 249.
20. Ibid., 243.
21. Ibid.
22. Pocock to Phillipson, 2 January 1975.
23. D. Winch to D. Forbes, 17 April 1975.
24. Ibid.; the result of Winch’s engagement with Pocock and Forbes can be seen in Winch, *Adam Smith’s Politics*.
25. Forbes, “Review of J. G. A. Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment*”.
26. Forbes to Winch, 25 April, 1975.
27. Forbes, *Hume’s Philosophical Politics*, 59–90.
28. Forbes, “Hume and the Scottish Enlightenment”, 97.
29. Pocock to Phillipson, 18 December 1979.
30. Ibid.
31. Pocock, “Virtues, Rights, and Manners”, in *Political Theory* 9/3, subsequently in *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, 37–50. The model was to some extent anticipated in “The mobility of property and the rise of eighteenth-century sociology.”
32. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, 49–50.
33. Ibid., 50.
34. Ibid., 49.
35. Ibid., 50.
36. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 504.
37. Ibid.
38. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, 50.
39. For Pocock’s discussion of A.O. Hirschman, see Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, 113–14.
40. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, 50.
41. Ibid.
42. Phillipson to Winch, 28 January 1980.
43. Ibid.
44. Kettler, “History and Theory in Ferguson’s Essay on the History of Civil Society”.
45. Hont and Ignatieff, “Needs and Justice in the *Wealth of Nations*”; Dunn, “From Applied Theology to Social Analysis”; Moore and Silverthorne, “Gershom Carmichael and the

Natural Jurisprudence Tradition in Eighteenth-Century Scotland"; Lieberman, "The Legal Needs of a Commercial Society".
46. Phillipson, "Adam Smith as Civic Moralist", in *Wealth and Virtue*, 179–202.
47. Robertson, "The Scottish Enlightenment at the Limits of the Civic Tradition".
48. Winch, "Adam Smith's 'Enduring Particular Result'".
49. Pocock to Phillipson, undated [summer 1979 as reply is dated 10 August 1979].
50. Phillipson to Pocock, 10 August 1979.
51. Pocock to Phillipson, undated [summer 1979].
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. For an account of Pocock's turn to Gibbon and "Enlightenments", see Robertson, "John Pocock's Histories of Political Thought".
55. Pocock to Phillipson, undated [summer 1979].
56. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 426.
57. Hont, "Natural Jurisprudence, Political Economy and the Concept of Civilisation", 8.
58. Ibid., 2.
59. Ibid., 7.
60. Ibid., 9.
61. Hont and Ignatieff, "Needs and Justice in the Wealth of Nations".
62. Hont expanded on this point in Hont, "Samuel Pufendorf's Jurisprudential Theory of History".
63. Hont, "Natural Jurisprudence, Political Economy and the Concept of Civilisation", 13.
64. Ibid., 16.
65. Ibid., 13.
66. Hont, "From the English 'Country Party' Tradition to the Defence of Civilisation".
67. Hont, "Negative Communities'".
68. Hont, "Natural Jurisprudence, Political Economy and the Concept of Civilisation", 18–19.
69. Hont gradually came to revise his view on Rousseau, emphasising instead the points of agreement between Smith and Rousseau and questioning whether Rousseau was really the critic of civilisation and commercial society that he was usually made out to be. For this, see, in particular, his posthumously published Carlyle Lectures in Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society*. See also Sonenscher, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, chap. 6.
70. Hont, "Natural Jurisprudence, Political Economy and the Concept of Civilisation", 25.
71. Ibid., 20.
72. Forbes, "Review of J. G. A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment*".
73. Hont, "Natural Jurisprudence, Political Economy, and the Concept of Civilisation", 26. Norbert Elias's two-volume work *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (1939) was largely unknown until the first volume was translated into English in 1969.
74. Hont's final thoughts on Smith and the nature of modern politics can be found in Hont, "Adam Smith's History of Law and Government as Political Theory".
75. Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 426.
76. Hont, "Introduction" to the Japanese translation of *Jealousy of Trade*.
77. Hont, "The Wealth of One Nation and the Dynamics of International Trade", 19.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid., 20.
80. For a detailed study of this idea, see Nakimovsky, *The Closed Commercial State.*
81. Hont, "The Wealth of One Nation", 24.
82. Ibid., 10.
83. Ibid., 21.
84. Hont, "Free Trade and the Economic Limits to National Politics", 113. Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, 257–8.
85. Hont, "The Wealth of One Nation", 23.
86. Hont, "The 'Rich Country-Poor Country' Debate in Scottish Classical Political Economy".
87. Hont, "Unsocial Sociability and the 18th Century Discourse of Politics and Society", 2.

88. Hont, "The Wealth of One Nation", 28.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid.
91. Hont, "The Permanent Crisis of a Divided Mankind", 166. Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, 447.
92. Frank, "The Development of Underdevelopment". See also Wallerstein, *World Systems Analysis*.
93. For a critique of Hont from a dependency theory point of view, see Cheney, "István Hont, the Cosmopolitan Theory of Commercial Globalization, and Twenty-First-Century Capitalism".
94. That Scotland was a case that "apparently contradicts the general thesis" was acknowledged by Braudel in *Civilisation and Capitalism, Vol. III*, 70.
95. Hont, "Conjectural History, Development Theory and the Context of Scottish Backwardness", 7.
96. Ibid., 8.
97. For the transition debate, see Aston and Philpin, *The Brenner Debate – Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in pre-Industrial Europe*. For Brenner's criticism of Wallerstein et al., see Brenner, "The Origins of Capitalist Development".
98. Brenner, "The Origins of Capitalist Development", 33.
99. Hont, "Conjectural History, Development Theory", 9.
100. Ibid., 12, 13, 18. The question of Scotland's economic development as a contradictory case had been discussed by Smout at a conference in Pisa 1978. See Braudel, *Civilisation & Capitalism*", 70, 636n.
101. Hobsbawm, "Capitalisme et agriculture: les réformateurs écossais au XVIIIe siècle".
102. Hont, "Conjectural History, Development Theory", 14–15.
103. Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, 354–88.
104. Hont, "Commercial Society and Political Theory in the Eighteenth Century", 82.
105. Hont, "Conjectural History, Development Theory", 2.
106. Sagar, "István Hont and Political Theory", 489.
107. Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, 115.
108. Ibid.

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