

OBITUARY

Istvan Hont (1947–2013): Life and Work

Hideo Tanaka

Istvan Hont, an intellectual and highly praised historian, died on March 29, 2013, at the age of 65. He was a renowned lecturer and researcher in the history of political thought. His work had a specific significance and influence with regard to Scottish Enlightenment. He is best known for *The Wealth and Virtue* (1983), co-edited with Michael Ignatieff, as well as his laborious work, *The Jealousy of Trade* (2005). Both books were translated into Japanese and were popular not only in Japan, but also in Western countries.

He was born and raised in Hungary in the turbulent period post-World War II in a family of secular Jews. Owing to these circumstances, he became multilingual, as was often the case for Eastern European minorities. Hont briefly served in the Hungarian army between 1964 and 1965. He enrolled at the University of Budapest, where he studied Technology for two years, after which he decided to pursue History and Philosophy instead. He completed his MA in 1973 and obtained his Ph.D. in 1974. The topic of his Doctoral dissertation was “David Hume and Scotland” and was supervised by the distinguished historian Eva H. Balazs. He then became a Research Officer at the Institute of History at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which required him to become a member of the Communist Party. He could not continue his job, and decided to migrate to the United Kingdom with his wife Anna Lovas in 1975.

This decision was facilitated by his collegial acquaintanceship with Michael Postan. While Hont was endeavoring to summarize *Economic History Review* as part of his daily routine work at the Institute, he happened to become the driver of Michael Postan, Professor of Economic History at Cambridge, then visiting the city. Postan encouraged Hont and helped him and his wife to depart for England. What Hont learned from Postan remains an open question; however, Hont and Ignatieff wrote in the preface of their *Wealth and Virtue*: “We wish to dedicate this book to a teacher and friend who supported our research and who, to our deep regret, did not live to see its first fruits: Professor Sir M. M.

Postan.”

Hont became a Ph.D. student at Oxford under the supervision of Hugh Trevor-Roper (1914–2003), who also supervised John Robertson (b. 1947) at that time. It is there that Istvan and Robertson became friends. Robertson started his research on the Scottish Militia Controversy and became a professor at Clair College, Oxford. He later moved to Cambridge. Hont’s wife Anna, a sociologist, abandoned her work in the field and became a computing specialist in order to provide for them. During his time at Oxford, Hont joined Sir John Hicks’ classes on the history of economic thought, which further deepened his knowledge in the humanities and social sciences.

Hont was elected a Fellow of King’s College, Cambridge, in 1978. About the same time, Michael Ignatieff (b. 1947) joined from Harvard, after obtaining his PhD. Here, at the newly established King’s College Research Centre, the two started the project “Political Economy and Society, 1750–1850.” This resulted in their co-edited volume, *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, in 1983. It yielded great success and became the hallmark of an era in the history of contemporary scholarship on the Scottish Enlightenment, which started in the 1970s. The work had profound influence among historians of political thought, law, and economics.

In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell and East European Countries were freed from the authoritarian socialist regime. The breakup of the USSR resulted in the establishment of the Russian Federation and several formally independent post-Soviet states. The prevalence of liberalism and market economy marked the end of the Cold War era. However, numerous conflicts took place in different regions of the world, including many of the East European countries. These changes and instabilities seem to have had a great impact on Hont’s work, as it shall be further elaborated in the current article.

In due course, Hont was invited to become a professor in political thought at Columbia University and became a visiting fellow at the Collegium Budapest in 1993–1994; however, he remained at Cambridge until his death. As he was denied the opportunity to become a professor at Harvard University by President Somers, his last post was as a Reader in History of Political Thought at Cambridge University.

He deepened his professional interests—especially in regard to David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Scottish Enlightenment—in four directions: (1) the relationship between commerce and politics in the modern nation state, which includes arguments concerning jealousy of trade; (2) the development of natural law theory; (3) the formation of the *Four Stages Theory*; and (4) arguments concerning luxury—the early Enlightenment debate on commerce and luxury. Articles related to these topics were compiled and published as part of

his first and last single-authored book, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (2005). This thorough and substantial book was the result of his continuous efforts to integrate a wide range of research topics and sophisticated arguments. In addition to a newly written substantial introduction, there are seven sophisticated and thoroughly elaborated articles.

First, Hont was mostly interested in the connection between commerce, national politics, and nationalism, which he critically assessed in the Introduction and in articles 2, 4, and 7. He postulates that the 18th century political economy, particularly that of Hume and Smith, constructed the framework for the modern understanding of international politics. Hont nevertheless emphasized that *de facto* barbarism, that is, power politics of commercial civilization in the modern Western nation state, continued overwhelming the moderation of statecraft, and the political economy pushed forward by the Enlightenment philosophers. In simple words, Enlightenment could not overcome power politics due to a kind of barbarism typical of the modern nation, national interest, and nationalism. Hont implies that not only Enlightenment humanism, but also cosmopolitanism and internationalism were defeated by nationalism and power politics.

In other words, even though Hont evaluated the original Scottish Political Economy as developed by Hume and Smith, which emphasized the positive aspects of modern commercial society, he noted the enduring influence of power politics of the Neo-Machiavellian Political Economy (the term was coined by John Pocock) committed to *Reason of State* and *Jealousy of Trade*. Hont maintains that the former endeavored to criticize the latter; however, the latter strongly influenced national politics between the 17th and 19th centuries. In his perspective, both were regarded as rivals in Modern Europe. His argument may be considered a refinement of the thesis of Imperialism of Free Trade, although there is no explicit reference to the names of Gallagher and Robinson.

Moreover, unlike Marx, Hont implicitly asked the question why socialism was historically defeated by capitalism. Marx claimed that it was inevitable for a capitalist society to collapse and give rise to a socialist one, that is, this was seen as a historical necessity and/or inevitability. Hont did not seem to be explicitly influenced by this idea. However, he elaborated on the complicated relationship between economic activities and politics in modern nation states. Hont was no more optimist than pessimist in his academic arguments regarding the modern nation state and its international relations. In fact, it could be said that he became more pessimistic about the Enlightenment legacy and tended to emphasize the dangers of Reason of State after 1989.

Second, his interest in natural law tradition and the development of natural

law theory consists of two inquiries: the formation of the *Four Stages Theory*, and the formation of a political economy as a response to the traditional natural law theory, also known as the theory of justice. The groundbreaking article, “Needs and Justice,” postulated that the theoretical assumptions of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* were diametrically opposed to and fundamentally critical of the traditional idea of natural law regarding distributive justice, by insisting that commercial society brought wealth to the laboring poor and satisfied the “Needs and Justice” by way of its own economic mechanism.

However, this argument seems to contradict the one made in *Jealousy of Trade*. To what extent did Hont distinguish between the Enlightened political economy; that is, the liberal humanitarian economic thinking of Hume and Smith, from the Neo-Machiavellian Political Economy of Charles Davenant, John Pollexfen, Henry Martin, Andrew Fletcher, and others? As it has already been mentioned, Hont utilized the terminology of Pocock’s Neo-Machiavellian political economy but curiously enough, did not make much of Pocock’s idea of commercial humanism. Indeed, Pocock himself only vaguely touched upon the idea of commercial humanism in his *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (1985), and never thoroughly elaborated on it. A possible reason could be that Pocock was not a historian of economic thought in the true sense of the term. Another likely explanation might be that Hont predominantly focused his interest on the drawbacks of the modern nation state and international power politics, rather than the welfare of commercial society.

Hont did not seem to follow Pocock’s idea of commercial humanism, and instead focused on the relationship between commerce and politics. Additionally, he seems to be rather indifferent to Pocock’s Civic Humanist paradigm, as he never explicitly criticized it. Virtue and corruption were the two key terms for civic humanism and even though Hont referred to both—especially when discussing Davenant, or when introducing Pocock’s interpretation of the Neo-Machiavellian political economy—he carefully avoided the term civic humanism *per se*.

Hont’s interest in the Natural Law Tradition, which was influenced by Duncan Forbes, led him to situate Smith between Pufendorf and Marx. This is the problem searched by late Ronald Meek earlier. Even though Hont was not explicitly proclaiming the legacy of Marx, he was certainly influenced by Marxism and took pride in critically utilizing it in Cambridge. His interdisciplinary approach to the history of ideas was more political than Marx’s; however, as a historian of political thought who succeeded Duncan Forbes, Hont emphasized the importance of economic factors more than the average student of political thought did.

Hont drew the attention of Japanese scholars after the publication of

Wealth and Virtue. In the preface of the Japanese translation of *Jealousy of Trade* (2009), Hont acknowledged his debt to Hiroshi Mizuta, the pioneer of Japanese Scottish Enlightenment study, who collaborated with him over the course of thirty years. Besides Mizuta, a number of Japanese scholars have been associated with Hont in various ways. Mizuta, alongside a team of eleven scholars, published the translation of *Wealth and Virtue*, which was published in 1990 by Miraisha, Tokyo. The book appealed to the Japanese academia and actively promoted the study of Scottish Enlightenment in Japan.

Hont came to Japan in December 2005 as a participant in the seminar “Cambridge Moment” at Chiba University, alongside John Dunn, John Pocock, Raymond Geuss, and others. Hont presented his paper “Commerce and Politics in 18th century political thought.” He then traveled to Kyoto, where he was a guest speaker at a meeting of the Adam Smith Society in Japan (presided by President Mizuta Hiroshi) He talked on “The Desire of Superiority: Adam Smith’s Notions of Competition and Nationalism,” and it was translated into Japanese by Prof. Mizuta in *The Newsletter of Adam Smith Society in Japan*, No. 73 (March 2006). He later on gave a lecture at a research meeting held by the author of the current paper. Hont’s lectures attracted many teachers and students at both meetings and were no less popular than Pocock’s lectures. In Nagoya, he talked about Lukács and Hungary’s intellectual history as requested by Mizuta.

After coming back to Cambridge in 1989, Hont devotedly taught and supervised undergraduate and PhD students, and worked on a variety of research projects, as John Robertson recalls in the Istvan Hont Archive by the Institute of Intellectual History, University of St. Andrews, 2013. Hont even dedicated efforts to unravel the mysteries of theology. These efforts seem even more heroic, bearing in mind that he left this world in such an abrupt manner. Hont left many unpublished papers, including Marxist articles that are now at the Institute of Intellectual History at the University of St. Andrews. I firmly believe that in order to understand the “true” Hont, it is of crucial importance that we can access these works as soon as possible.

(Hideo Tanaka: Faculty of Economics, Aichigakuin University)