



History of European Ideas

ISSN: 0191-6599 (Print) 1873-541X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rhei20

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by István Hont, ed. Lasse S. Anderson with Béla Kapossy and Richard Whatmore, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2026, 294pp, £90.00 (hbk), ISBN 9781009597586, £28.00 (pbk), ISBN 9781009597555

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To cite this article: Paul Sagar (11 May 2026): Political Economy from Pufendorf to Marx: Culture, Needs and Property Rights, History of European Ideas, DOI: [10.1080/01916599.2026.2669738](https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2026.2669738)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2026.2669738>



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Published online: 11 May 2026.



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Istvan Hont taught at Cambridge until his early death in 2013. A defector from communist Hungary, he began his academic career in England working under Hugh Trevor Roper at Oxford, before eventually settling at King's College, Cambridge. Although still not especially well known beyond British-based intellectual historians, within that demographic he is recognised as a leading, in many ways intellectually dominant, figure in the later phases of the Cambridge School.

Notoriously, Hont himself denied the existence of any such thing as the Cambridge School.¹ But it is helpful to situate him accordingly, at least for broadbrush purposes. One (inevitably stylised) way to do this is to understand the Cambridge School as a persistent advocacy of the primarily *historical* study of political ideas, unfolding in roughly four phases, with two figureheads in each. The first came with the pathbreaking work of J.G.A. Pocock (himself only briefly located in Cambridge, but no matter), as well as the research and pedagogical influence of Duncan Forbes at Clare College. The second came with the hugely influential work (both explicitly methodological, but also in terms of substantive scholarly output) of John Dunn and Quentin Skinner. The third can be characterised as the evolution of Cambridge paradigms and preoccupations, exemplified most clearly by Hont and his former Cambridge colleague, later Professor at Harvard, Richard Tuck. The fourth phase is the one currently in effect, led by Richard Bourke and Annabelle Brett in the Cambridge Faculty of History. (It is unclear whether there will be a fifth; nothing lasts forever.)

Hont's intellectual reputation and his status as a pivotal member of the later Cambridge school were confirmed and cemented by the 2005 publication of his *Jealousy of Trade*.² A collection of seven previously published essays – as well as a long synoptic introduction which effectively constituted a book in its own right – this brought into focus Hont's three-decade long attempt to grapple with the status, legacy, and

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outstanding tasks of modern European political thought. Summarising the contribution of *Jealousy of Trade* would be an impossible undertaking – it is a landmark of the history of political thought – but a necessarily inadequate attempt would emphasise Hont's insistence that modern European political thought emerges in the eighteenth century as a result of economic competition becoming a central and impossible-to-ignore feature of political contestation in a world of hostile states. In the process he revolutionised the understanding of individual thinkers (Hobbes, Smith, Sieyès, and many more), as well as of the sweep and nature of our intellectual historical materials. In turn, he cast new light on the continued and lasting theoretical preoccupations of contemporary normative theorising – often with the effect of exposing a great deal of late twentieth century political theory as the shallow, parochial, repetition of failed idioms.

It is therefore understandable why there is likely to be interest in Hont's unpublished work (albeit much of it already available online through the Intellectual History Archive at the University of Saint Andrews).³ A notoriously perfectionist researcher who published relatively little during his working career (no monograph was ever forthcoming), Hont's death at 65 prompted the question of what else he might have achieved, not least if he had been more willing to put his ideas into print. There is also a motivation amongst his admirers – amongst whom I, his former doctoral student, count myself – to have his achievements recognised more widely, and to increase his influence accordingly. Partly to that end, his 2009 Carlyle Lectures were published in 2015 as *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*.⁴

I originally supported that endeavour; indeed, when still a graduate student, I assisted in the editorial process. In subsequent years, however, I have come to question whether it was the right thing to do. The essential reason is that it seems undeniable (to me at least) that there is a gap in quality between *Politics in Commercial Society* and the works Hont published while still alive. And this is hardly surprising. The surviving lecture drafts are a long way from being fully worked-out arguments and were clearly formatted for oral presentation. Indeed, I remember noticing that the most advanced versions of each, available in the archive, tended to have handwritten annotations applied to the first third of printed documents. My guess is that Hont was editing them right up until he had to deliver, but only had time to look at the start of each. Furthermore, it is surely telling that he seemed to have no plans to publish these works while still alive. (Indeed, when working as his doctoral student, I once asked for permission to read his drafts, which he refused, saying it would not be helpful for me.) In my more mature opinion, this was work that Hont himself thought not good enough to be published. And while, of course, part of the problem Hont has set for his literary executors is that his own standards were so incredibly high that he published less than perhaps he should have during his career, over the subsequent years I have nonetheless started to think that perhaps he was right in his own (apparent) verdict. That the Carlyle lectures were fine as lectures, but were not ready to see the world as committed to print.

In a sense, this just doesn't matter: the archival record is what it is. If we are treating Hont simply as the subject of historical study, then the lectures constitute historical information. But if the ambition of publishing *Politics in Commercial Society* was (at least in part) to enhance Hont's posthumous reputation, through the showcasing of hitherto unseen contributions, it is not clear that doing so could achieve this. The bar set by

Jealousy of Trade was astonishingly high. The identity of authorship did not guarantee clearing it again.⁵

This brings us to the present volume, which collects seven of Hont's previously unpublished papers. These date from roughly the early 1980s to the mid 1990s, during which time he (co)organised a series of research projects on the history of political economy based in King's College, resulting in the highly influential 1983 collection *Wealth and Virtue*, as well as the planned collection *After Adam Smith: Political Economy and Theories of Commercial Society* which never saw the light of day.⁶ (Anecdotal reports say that it easily could have, except that as editor Hont withheld it from Cambridge University Press.)

The essays are prefaced by an outstanding scholarly introduction by Lasse S. Anderson, who does an excellent job on two fronts. First, he captures wonderfully well not just the overall nature of Hont's research ambitions and contributions, but also the sheer *heft* of Hont's intellectual engagement: the incredibly high standards of scholarship that he demanded (of himself and others) and just how seriously he took the tasks at hand. Second, Anderson provides clear rationale for why these seven essays have been brought together. Essentially, they constitute the otherwise submerged intellectual origins of what became the fully developed Hont framework in *Jealousy of Trade*: the attempt to understand the emergence of eighteenth-century political economy as rooted in the predecessor discourses of natural law theory on the one hand, and civic humanism on the other. These in turn provided the intellectual foundations for Marx's epochal attempt to reconfigure political economy in the nineteenth century. Hont notoriously never wrote the book that would have made this case. But as Anderson presents things, in order to achieve the intellectual advances required for *Jealousy of Trade*, Hont first had to integrate this work from the 1980s and 1990s with the centrality of reason of state discourse (in particular the legacy of Hobbes), in order to arrive at his mature position. But by recovering these seven papers and placing them together, we are effectively able to reconstruct the book that Hont never wrote, and yet which nonetheless paved the way to *Jealousy of Trade*.

In one sense, therefore, the question now becomes: what do we make of this (putative) book, for which Hont had the materials, but declined to present as such? It is here that it concerns me that Hont precisely did *not* publish this work himself. It is not because there is any lack of insight, or theoretical sophistication, on display here. Quite the contrary: we see just how seriously Hont took his work, the huge scope and ambition of his research agenda. It is more because I fear that the reason Hont never published these essays is that he did not think the contributions offered were adequate.

At this point it is simply impossible for me to make an impartial or dispassionate assessment. Much of my own work, after all, has been constructed in direct dialogue with Hont, following a period under his doctoral supervision. My judgement is necessarily coloured by that formation. Nonetheless, I have serious doubts about the central thesis of this 'book'.

First, I believe it was a mistake to think that the emergence of political economy could only be explained through recourse to the predecessor discourses of civic humanism and natural jurisprudence. This strikes me as a fundamental misunderstanding of what these two forms of *Wissenschaft* constitute, as well as of how intellectual fields emerge (and thus have to be historically understood). Tellingly, however, the first three papers in

this collection are overwhelmingly preoccupied with an attempt to wrestle with, and synthesise, the two leading contributions of the 'first phase' of the Cambridge School. Namely, Forbes's insistence that David Hume and Adam Smith be understood by rooting their eighteenth-century contributions in seventeenth-century Protestant natural law theory, and Pocock's attempt to claim these thinkers as part of a 'civic humanist' tradition but under the innovative characterisation of 'commercial humanism'.⁷ Insofar as Hume, and especially Smith, played major roles in the emergence of political economy, they therefore serve as the necessary gateway to Marx, Hont's projected endpoint of theoretical engagement and explanation (as evidenced by the fourth and fifth papers here). This in turn explains Hont's extensive engagement with Pufendorf (and to a lesser extent, Grotius), who is accorded the status of providing the necessary natural law foundations for Smith's later intellectual innovations.

But my concern here is that this is a false framework. To put it bluntly, 'commercial humanism' was an invention of Pocock's, without historical and theoretical plausibility, while an attempt to root Hume and Smith in a natural law foundation is a categorical misunderstanding of the core nature of their intellectual enterprises. Clearly, I am here picking some very big fights by way of some very big claims, which I cannot hope to substantiate in a brief review.⁸ But in a way, that isn't the point. The point is that I suspect Hont *himself* came to think that these were fundamentally mistaken approaches to the eighteenth-century emergence of political economy. Partly, this is borne out by the very fact that he never published this work. Partly it is borne out by the fact that much of this kind of thinking is absent from *Jealousy of Trade*. (Insofar as Pufendorf remains, it is for his role in allegedly providing the theoretical foundations of sociability theory and the Four Stages account to Adam Smith. Indeed I am sceptical of this too, but it is already a long way from claiming that the eighteenth-century can only be understood through direct engagement with the technical details of earlier natural law theory.) And partly it is because, around 2011, Hont himself told me that he no longer thought that Smith or Hume paid any serious attention to natural law.

This had taken me by surprise because I was already thinking along these lines myself, following engagement with the work of Forbes and Knud Haakonssen, and had anticipated that I was going to have to fight my corner against my doctoral supervisor.⁹ Instead, he seemed to agree – and also told me that Pocock's attempt to apply civic humanism to the Scottish Enlightenment was, with the exception of Adam Ferguson, a misguided enterprise. It is thus difficult for me to be comfortable with the publication of these mid-career papers, given that Hont never chose to publish them himself, and I suspect that by later in his career he had largely moved on from such framings. But if so, that means that what we have here is not a recovered book but the remnants of an abandoned project. This would perhaps explain why it was never published.

My second line of scepticism is different. It emanates from what I have, in the past 15 years, come to believe is a major shortcoming in Hont's work in general, one brought out especially clearly in these papers, and which unlike the above is continuous throughout his work. Namely, the relative absence of attention paid, and importance accorded to *philosophy* as a major plank of modern European political thought. Again, this is an enormous claim that I cannot properly substantiate here. However, I will say the following in terms of (inadequate) illustration.

Although Hont engaged seriously with the work of Hume through pathbreaking studies and indeed accorded him a central place in what became the mature framework of *Jealousy of Trade*, it is overwhelmingly Hume, the political and economic essayist, and Hume, the historian, who features. We hear little about the Hume of the *Treatise of Human Nature* and of the two *Enquiries*. This by itself might not be such a problem; but I believe it becomes so when we turn to the fact that Hont engaged more extensively with Adam Smith than with any other thinker. On my reading, it is evident that Smith was working directly and self-consciously in the lineage of philosophical work inaugurated by Hume and encapsulated in his famous slogan of applying the ‘science of man’ to the study of human affairs. Particularly influential in this regard, I take it, are Hume’s bequeathing to Smith a sentimentalist approach in ethical theory (i.e. a passion-based account of moral psychology) and, by extension, making ‘opinion’ the central plank of secular, post-Hobbesian political theory. Yet the philosophical influence of Hume upon Smith is often notable for its absence in Hont’s scholarship.

Instead, in the earlier papers in this collection, we obtain elaborate reconstructions of Pufendorf, despite there being no compelling evidence that Smith drew on the German in any substantial way. (Brief mentions, in lectures given to teenagers, do not constitute otherwise.) In the later papers, we are given attempts to read *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as an *avant-garde* anticipation of Kant’s later notion of unsocial sociability, and where Frances Hutcheson is presented by Hont as more important to Smith than Hume. Again, I think these are mistakes: I think that Kant’s conception of sociability was *less sophisticated* than Smith’s, in part precisely because he engaged primarily with Hobbes, and not Hume, on this matter. Similarly, Hutcheson’s moral philosophy had been rendered redundant by Hume, and Smith knew and endorsed the innovations of his friend over his former teacher. A more plausible reading than Hont’s would be that *TMS* is precisely what it presents itself as: a traditional work of ethical philosophy, building on the revolutionary advances Hume had made but correcting them in order to provide what remains the outstanding philosophical work of ethical sentimentalism in the Western tradition.¹⁰ Yet even by the time of the 2009 Carlyle lectures, Hont was attempting to root his interpretations of Smith through Rousseau and disagreement over conceptual history frameworks, with Hume-the-philosopher still barely getting a look in. This is especially remarkable given that Hont there focuses predominantly on *TMS* (not *The Wealth of Nations*), a work of moral philosophy intimately engaged with the innovations pioneered by Hume and whose influence on the work is far greater than that of Rousseau.¹¹

My point here is not only that one needs to recognise philosophy in order to appreciate the Hume-Smith interface, an important aspect of Enlightenment intellectual history. If that were all that was at stake, my disagreement with Hont would consist merely of our having different intellectual tastes when operating in historical modes. (Indeed, that is partly what is going on.) The more important, wider, point is that I believe Hont made a crucial error when he set out to try and claim that the history of Western political thought not only needed to recognise the rise of political economy since the eighteenth century (undoubtedly true), but also his apparent belief that it was *only* the incorporation of (historically-inflected) political economy that was really required.

As I have put it elsewhere, *political theory needs philosophy*, for the inescapable reason that political theory is ultimately normative, and only philosophy can deliver normativity

in this area.¹² Insofar as Hont, throughout his career, appeared to think he could do without philosophy, my view is that his project was thus unable to deliver on its final ambitions. To my mind, these collected papers bring this out especially clearly.

What then to make of what we have been given? To a large degree much turns on what we take the object of analysis to be. Enough time has now passed that the Cambridge School itself has become a legitimate object of historical investigation.¹³ And in that regard this collection is an extremely valuable resource. It shows, I suggest, the intellectual formation of one of the leading members of the Cambridge School's third phase, achieving intellectual maturity by wrestling with the ideas of the two leading thinkers of the first phase. (Regarding Hont's engagement with, and rejection of, Quentin Skinner, the dominant figure of the second phase, see *Jealousy or Trade*.) For historians of the Cambridge School, much is to be had here. For those of us aspiring to reach high standards in the history of political thought, there is much to be learned here in terms of the scale and difficulty of the tasks required.

Yet I would caution against anyone turning to this work and hoping to find a contribution on a par with *Jealousy of Trade*, or Hont's other published work. To an extent this is because the contributions here are so uneven. The standout piece is the fourth chapter, in which Hont presents the case for understanding Marx as necessarily committed to the idea of 'negative community,' a theoretical precondition for postcapitalist society transcending private property rights, and whose intellectual history may well be rooted in seventeenth-century natural law theory. But the gap between such a seemingly fully worked-out contribution to the history of ideas, one that would not be out of place in *Jealousy of Trade*, and what are evidently conference presentations (such as Chapters 1 and 7 as presented here) is pronounced. The end result is that this is not (*pace* Andersen) a recovered book. These are the incomplete artefacts of a series of aborted projects. They show us the working processes of a powerful mind, one that would later go on to produce some of the most important work in the history of political thought yet published. But those are not the same things.

Notes

1. Richard Bourke, "Revising the Cambridge School," *Political Theory* 46, No. 3 (2018), 367.
2. Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
3. <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/intellectualhistory/collections/show/40> [Accessed on 15 April 2026].
4. Istvan Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
5. Robin Douglass, "Theorising Commercial Society: Rousseau, Smith and Hont," *European Journal of Political Theory* 17, no. 4 (2018).
6. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (eds), *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
7. Duncan Forbes, "Natural Law and the Scottish Enlightenment," in *The Origins and Nature of the Scottish Enlightenment: Essays*, ed. Andrew S. Skinner, and R. H. Campbell (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1982); Forbes, Duncan, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); J. G. A. Pocock, "Virtues, Rights, and Manners: A Model for Historians of

- Political Thought,” in *_virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
8. For that, see the relevant chapters of Paul Sagar, *The Opinion of Mankind: Sociability and the Theory of the State from Hobbes to Smith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).
 9. Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
 10. Robin Douglass, “A Moral Philosophy for Commercial Society?,” in *Interpreting Adam Smith: Critical Essays*, ed. Paul Sagar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).
 11. Paul Sagar, “Beyond Sympathy: Smith’s Rejection of Hume’s Moral Theory,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (2017); Paul Sagar, “Smith and Rousseau, After Hume and Mandeville,” *Political Theory* 46, no. 1 (2018).
 12. Paul Sagar, “The State Without Sovereignty: Authority and Obligation in Hume’s Political Philosophy,” *History of Political Thought* 37, No. 2 (2016), 276.
 13. Bourke, Richard, *Hegel’s World Revolutions* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2023), chap. 9; Samuel James, “J.G.A. Pocock and the Idea of the ‘Cambridge School’ in the History of Political Thought,” *History of European Ideas* 45, no. 1 (2019).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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