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DOI:

[10.1177%2F1474885118782385](https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1474885118782385)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Sagar, P. (2018). Istvan Hont and Political Theory. *EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF POLITICAL THEORY*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1474885118782385>

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# István Hont and Political Theory

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## 1. Introduction

In the last decade there has been a growing call for normative political theorists to adopt a more ‘realistic’ approach to their subject.<sup>1</sup> Realists are by no means all of one mind, but they have tended to follow Bernard Williams in calling for ‘an approach which gives greater autonomy to distinctively political thought’ (2005: 3). Yet thus far realism has been a predominantly negative movement: rejecting an ‘ethics first’, or ‘political moralist’ approach (Geuss, 2008: 9; Williams, 2005: 1-3), associated in particular with John Rawls, and taken to be the dominant style in Anglo-analytic political theory since the enormous impact of *A Theory of Justice* (1971). This has, however, recently begun to change, with studies by Matt Sleat (2013), Rob Jubb (2015), Edward Hall (2017) and myself (Sagar, 2018) articulating positive interventions that aim to analyse political phenomena – such as the idea of legitimacy, the place of equality in a modern capitalist society, and the concept of liberty – in expressly normative terms, whilst still preserving a focus on what is distinctively *political* thought.

This move towards a positive realist programme is to be welcomed. But it has only just begun, and the definite shape of any constructive realist alternative remains obscure. It has been suggested by scholars sympathetic to realism, however, that a constructive way forward will be to turn to history, and particularly the history of

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<sup>1</sup> Important contributions to the realist debate include Williams 2005, Geuss 2008, 2010; Bavister-Gould 2013; Forrester 2012; Freedman 2012; Galston 2010; Horton 2010; Hall 2014, 2015; Stears and Honig 2011; Jubb 2014, 2015; Larmore 2013; Freyenhagen 2011; Philp 2010, 2012; Rossi 2012, 2013; Runciman 2017; Sangiovanni 2008a, 2008b; Scheuerman 2013; Stears 2005, 2007; Sleat 2010, 2011, 2014, 2016. On why Geuss and Williams may, however, be importantly different from their realist ‘successors’, due to their starting from a fundamental rejection of prevailing notions of what morality itself is, see Hall and Sleat (2017).

political thought, for materials germane to making progress (Geuss 2001; Williams, 2005: 90-6; 2014; Waldron 2013, 2016; Bourke 2009; Sagar, 2016a; Runciman, 2017).<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately this has so far remained a largely general suggestion, not substantiated beyond piecemeal, albeit often insightful, interventions. Nonetheless, the suggestion that the history of political thought may be of especial value to realism is very much worth taking seriously. This paper attempts to show one particular way in which this may be true: by turning to the body of work left to us by István Hont, and highlighting the resources that it provides for the development of a positive, historically-informed, realist political theory.

Hont was primarily a historian of political thought, who published only a few detailed studies, and no freestanding monograph, before his early death in 2013. His relative obscurity, at least to scholars outside the history of political thought, perhaps explains the lack of interest he has garnered amongst political theorists. Nonetheless, he was a historian who explicitly claimed that his interventions were made ‘with eyes firmly fixed on the challenges of today’, claiming that reading the best thinkers of (especially) the eighteenth century could help ‘unmask theoretical and practical impasses and eliminate repetitive patterns of controversy’, precisely because the ‘commercial future that many eighteenth-century observers imagined as plausible has become our historical present’ (Hont, 2005a: 5, 156). Yet Hont tended to leave the implications for contemporary political analysis to be inferred from his detailed historical studies, rather than stating them up front. And indeed, drawing such inferences from Hont’s work is made difficult by the high levels of compression that characterize his writings, alongside a dense blend of historical and philosophical reconstruction of past thinker’s ideas, often

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that in fact two claims might be made here, that are not in practice always distinguished clearly: that looking to the history of political thought offers exemplars for how to do realistic political theory, versus a broader claim that we need to look at history in general to understand the peculiarities of the situation we find ourselves in, enabling us to theorize more realistically. The gap between these two claims will be especially relevant at the end of this article.

integrated directly with specific interpretations not only of particular arguments, but of wider historical and conceptual issues. The result, as one reviewer has put it, is that the ‘difficulty faced by the reader is that Hont is never explicit about what his political philosophy is, nor about how he thinks modern political theory might be moved forward by a better understanding of political theory written three hundred years ago’ (Harris, 2016: 160-1).

This article tries to make explicit some of the political theoretic upshots of Hont’s analyses. It does not, however, attempt any statement of ‘Hont’s political theory’. Whatever that was, it is now lost to us. Nonetheless, I suggest that there are strong affinities between the vision of politics that emerges from Hont’s historical writings, and the political philosophy Bernard Williams developed towards the end of his life. As far as I am aware, however, this was not deliberate. Although Hont and Williams were colleagues at King’s College, Cambridge, I know of no evidence indicating their having any significant working relationship. Furthermore, the posthumously published nature of much of Williams’s political writings means that it would not have been available to Hont when he was developing the bulk of his ideas, and prior to the collection of his most important writings in *Jealousy of Trade* (which emerged the same year, 2005, as Williams’s posthumous *In the Beginning was the Deed*). The affinity I point towards is thus more of a natural intellectual harmony than a deliberate orchestration. But it is no less valuable for that.

That there is such an affinity can be seen in two particular ways. The first is that the understanding of liberalism put forward by Hont – especially regarding its historical emergence, and its specific political character – points us in the direction of what Williams, following Judith Shklar, called ‘the liberalism of fear’ (Shklar, 1998). Second, Hont is a helpful guide in making sense of – and in turn potentially validating – Williams’s claim that for contemporary western societies the only legitimate form of

political organization at the start of the twenty-first century is liberalism. Summed up in Williams's self-confessedly crude and schematic formulation, his claim was that 'Legitimacy + Modernity = Liberalism' (2005: 9).<sup>3</sup> This was a specific contention about the death of political competitor idioms in late capitalism as a result of historical events in the twentieth century, meaning that only liberalism now 'makes sense' as a viable form of political organization in democratic western societies (Sagar, 2016a: 370-4). Nonetheless, the majority of attention paid to Williams's work has concentrated on his idea of legitimacy in the abstract, in particular the notion of a 'basic legitimation demand', and the attendant realist claim that this comes prior to concerns about justice, and hence that the way in which the legitimacy issue is settled restricts the possibilities for how justice issues can be coherently managed by agents in situations of potentially extensive disagreement (e.g. Rossi, 2012, 2013; Sleat, 2010, 2014; Hall 2015). Less attention, however, has been paid to what might be meant by 'modernity' and 'liberalism', or how fleshing out those categories might confirm (or indeed undermine) Williams's conclusion that 'now and around here' liberalism is the only form of politics that meets the basic legitimation demand.<sup>4</sup> Yet Hont is an illuminating guide to what 'modernity' might mean, precisely because that notion is so interwoven with liberalism, itself a category of political organization for the large-scale commercial societies with which Hont was centrally preoccupied. An important aim of this article is thus to suggest that if the historical story Hont maintains about the rise of liberalism – i.e. the form of politics that orders a large-scale commercial society of the sort that we now inhabit – is true, then the case for believing that Legitimacy + Modernity does indeed = Liberalism, is considerably strengthened.

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<sup>3</sup> For substantiations of Williams's position and corrections to prevalent misreadings, Hall, 2015; Sagar, 2016a.

<sup>4</sup> For a partial exception, somewhat critical of Williams on this score, Jubb, 2015.

My argument is necessarily speculative in nature. It aims to bring out the broad outlines of Hont's political insights, and suggest ways in which these complement the arguments of one prominent recent realist. The underlying ambition is to push realist political theory in a more historically sensitive direction, as some recent proponents have advocated. As we shall see by the end of this essay, however, the call for history may itself generate problems, insofar as 'history' is importantly not identical with 'the history of political thought'. But to get to that point, we must first begin with Hont's foundational claim: that no viable modern political theory can ignore the economy.

## **2. The Economy**

For Hont, modern politics is fundamentally characterized by the advent of economics as a primary concern of state actors. Whilst groups of human beings have always engaged in trade, and pre-modern western political arrangements certainly had to manage the internal as well as external processes and consequences of material exchange, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries European states underwent a profound transformation. This was because trade evolved from an activity undertaken primarily to satisfy individual and group needs, to one aiming at securing profits, and not simply for individual material advancement, but *relative* advancement so as to attain superiority over potentially dangerous neighbours (Hont, 2005a: 8, 52). In other words trade – and the management of the domestic economy that was needed to engage successfully in trade – was married to the imperatives of war. International competition between advanced European states by the eighteenth century moved from a military activity, to a fiscal-military one.

Following David Hume – whose work he identified, along with that of Adam Smith, as the 'most promising intellectual site for investigating the link between politics and the modern economy' (5) – Hont termed this particular conjunction of trade and war

'jealousy of trade'. This was a 'mongrel idiom', however, insofar as it was a combination of two things that did not naturally coalesce (6). Trade was an inherently mutually beneficial activity: parties only exchanged goods or labour when each respectively gained from doing so. War, by contrast, was zero-sum in ambition: one party sought to gain at the direct expense of the other. 'Jealousy' in its eighteenth century usage referred, as it had in the seventeenth century, to competitive suspicion of others due to the potential threat that they posed. In Hobbes's famous phrase, 'Kings, and Persons of Sovereigne authority' were in an international state of nature with each other, and therefore 'in continuall jealousies, and in the state and posture of Gladiators, having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another' (Hobbes, 2014: 196). In fact 'jealousy of trade' was, according to Hont, a mongrel idiom in a further, and deeper, sense. For it drew upon a Renaissance discourse emphasizing *ragion di stato*, 'reason of state', i.e. the putative legitimacy of acting in whatever way was required so as to ensure the security of the city, as well as its *grandezza*, i.e. the requirement of military expansion of the republic to dominate neighbours so as to avoid becoming dominated itself, and thus ultimately managing to preserve *libertas*. But 'jealousy of trade' yoked this predominantly classical republican outlook together with a Hobbesian idiom of centralized political authority, the modern 'state' organised around unified sovereignty aiming at the *salus populi* and not simply the status of an individual ruler (Hont, 2005a: 9, 13; Skinner, 2002). The result was a potentially devastating conjunction of military aggression with the resources of centralized political authority, enacted not in tiny republican city-states, but territorially large and highly populous European monarchies, fueled by the wealth of advanced luxury-driven commercial economies, and able to generate potentially unlimited war finance via the innovation of public credit (Hont, 2005a: 77, 325-53). Large European states of the eighteenth century were thus capable of engaging in devastating wars of aggression on a scale unimaginable to the earlier theorists of republican *libertas* and

*grandezza*, but thereby also rendering the international arena permanently volatile and unstable in a way that Hobbes had explicitly claimed that it was not (Malcolm, 2002). Trade threatened to become both a cause of war – invading to secure or protect home markets – and war by other means: protectionism and other aggressive trade practices invoked so as to disadvantage economic-cum-military competitors (Hont, 2005a: 5-10, 23, 52-5, 77).

This analysis, we can follow Hont's lead in noting, remains viable as an assessment of our present conditions (154-6). Europe may finally have been pacified, at great human cost, in the two and a half centuries since Hume diagnosed 'jealousy of trade' as a central modern pathology. But the domestic politics of all states remains heavily and irreducibly geared towards the successful management of the economy in the context of ceaseless global economic competition. No state can presently afford to leave its economy unmanaged, or managed poorly, if it wishes to secure the good of its population. Jealousy of trade – i.e. aggressive economic practices directed to the securing or military superiority – as a *solution* to the problems presented by the need to manage the domestic economy in the face of endless competition may have been tamed in recent decades. (This would seem to be due, in particular, to the political and economic hegemony of the United States since the Second World War, as well as due to the creation of the European Union as a stabilizing factor in what was previously history's bloodiest arena, at least amongst capitalist nations, and especially since the early 1990s.) But there is nothing to prevent jealousy of trade from returning to the world stage, should the circumstances of our relative present stability deteriorate. Indeed, extrapolating from Hont's analysis, we might suggest that America's looming confrontation with an economically powerful China may reveal that the fears of the eighteenth century have not been left behind, but only postponed whilst being translated from a continental to a global level. Time will tell, one way or the other.



On Hont's analysis, the logic of commerce is global, but the logic of politics is national, or local. Whilst consumers seek the cheapest goods wherever they can be found, and producers seek to make them wherever it is cheapest to do so, this rarely coincides with national borders. As a result, opening national economies to international competition can bring painful consequences for those who end up being either undersold, or rendered unemployed and unemployable, by the activities of competitors. Yet losers in economic competition do not meekly accept their lot, submitting to the dictates of market forces whatever they may be. Instead, affected individuals push back, if necessary through non-market means, i.e. via politics, so as to try and secure any market advantage that they do have, or to undermine that of rivals so as to take it from them. There will always be significant pressure put on political actors to help protect the bulk of their populations from the ravages of market competition, whilst a secure and healthy economy is itself a pre-requisite of being able to engage safely in a world of jealous, and therefore potentially hostile, competitors.<sup>5</sup>

On Hont's analysis the phenomenon of 'jealousy of trade' points not only to the fact that the logics of trade and of war (or of politics more generally) are inextricably intertwined, but to the important further point that the latter has a tendency to dominate, and make subservient, the former (6). In political practice, positional advantage and the need to secure short-term gain will frequently trump considerations of longer-term benefit that might be had from engaging in the reciprocally advantageous outcomes of trading. This is because the opening up of an economy to competitive market forces threatens to bring economic shock – and attendant loss of welfare – to out-competed domestic parties, but also thereby engenders a sense of loss of national standing and

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<sup>5</sup> Which is not to say that *all* sections of the domestic population will be protected from competition at all times, and at any cost – clearly, states can and do decide to let domestic industries or uncompetitive economic sectors die by the hand of foreign competition. The point is that this is a *political choice*, one made in favour of relevant countervailing considerations.

prestige in the community or nation as a whole, and which political actors in various strata of society cannot be expected to simply welcome, or to sit idly by and accept without action. As a result, when political and economic considerations pull in different directions, it is frequently political considerations that will win, with market-based activities bent towards political goals or ideological causes, ‘regaining political autonomy from market pressures, if not by military means, then by abandoning markets or by rigging them’ (Hont, 2005a: 62). In essence, therefore, Hont encourages something like the reversal of the Marxist trope familiar from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, ‘the economic determination of politics’ (4). For Hont, more often than not it is economics that is determined by politics, or some messy attempt at such. Economic decisions are made not only through political mechanisms, but with the goal of securing political ends – frequently at the expense of purely economic considerations of efficiency or growth, if those should be judged subservient to prevailing political goals. This is *not* to say that unilateral economic protectionism is the necessary policy of modern trading states – clearly that is not so – but it is to say that engagement with international economic competition is a process that must continuously be managed by political leaders so as to make such processes acceptable to sufficient numbers of those who are faced with living with their consequences.

Interestingly, this indicates that on Hont’s analysis one political outlook that is ruled out as a realistic response to the centrality of market interactions in modern politics is (somewhat ironically) pro-market state-minimalism, i.e. the suggestion that the state should limit itself to creating a hospitable environment for private interactions, especially those of production and exchange, but refrain as far as possible from interfering or acting beyond that – an outlook that has received widespread currency in the rhetoric of western politicians since the 1980s, first on the right, and increasingly on the left, and is frequently associated with the rise of what usually referred to as neo-liberalism (Davies

2015). On Hont's analysis, such state minimalism is inherently a pipedream. If the logic of politics tends to dominate that of economics, then state-minimalist governments will quickly be replaced by political actors promising (ingenuously or otherwise, via credible means or not) to intervene in the operations of the market so as to meet the demands of those groups who pressure them to do so. Such pressure will come, on the one hand, from the losers in economic competition, who typically demand relief and protection. But it will come also from the winners, who will not wish to risk their position of advantage being undercut by future unrestrained competition, and will engage in attempts to rig the economic game so as to entrench and make permanent their superiority. This cannot be done by purely economic means, and so politics will be the resort of those who wish to cement or gain market advantage. Adam Smith, as Hont noted, claimed that this is exactly what the merchant class of eighteenth century Britain had achieved, effectively using the power of the state to secure its own economic interests at the expense of the wider population of Britain and (especially) its colonies (Hont, 2005a: 54-7; Smith, 1975: 452-98, 642-62; Muthu, 2008).

Smith was a defender of the liberalisation of trade in the context of moving Britain away from an intellectually bankrupt and economically and morally corrupt mercantile system (Smith, 1975: 428-688; cf. Hont, 2005a: 52-5, 75; Hont, 1994: 80-3). But Smith recognised that what was needed was *alternative* economic management – which at the time meant greater acceptance of competitive market-based activities – rather than simply the vacating of politics to make way for economic exchange. Hont was keen to dismiss the caricatured misunderstanding of Smith as a modern right-wing free marketeer *avant-la-lettre*. One reason for this – aside from historical anachronism – was that Hont's emphasis on the market economy as integral to understanding modern politics in no way committed him to a state-minimalist libertarian politics, any more than it did Smith (Hont, 2005a: 100, 110, 354, 361-2; Hont, 1994: 80). On the contrary, state-

minimalist libertarianism is on Hont's Smithian analysis ruled out as a realistic – or for that matter, honest – form of political organization for modern societies *precisely because* the market economy is now a central aspect of politics, but where ongoing political pressures dictate that the economy will be interfered with ceaselessly as a response to the demands of agents affected by its outcomes. *How* the economy is managed and interfered with is of course an open question, to be contested by both left and right (the latter, over the past three decades, having generally been in the ascendency). But it is precisely a question that has to actually be answered, and answered continuously, not merely left to resolve itself in the absence of politics.

The point here is twofold. On the one hand, not only would state minimalist libertarianism now have to be (somewhat ironically) imposed upon a modern society if it were to be tried, it would have to be continuously *re-imposed* (by whom? with what authority? by what means?) as actors subjected to it moved away from its precepts in response to it. If state minimalist libertarianism is committed to the utopian ideal that we can somehow do away with politics, it is hardly a viable option for realists, be they of left or right, hostile or friendly to market forces. Yet if admitting the role of politics, and thereby of what Smith called the independent 'principle of motion' possessed by each member of society, then the only method for maintaining a genuinely state-minimalist regime will be to impose it by force upon those who, via their collective individual actions, reject it, as some inevitably will (Smith, 1976: 234).

A second point cuts more deeply. This is that the state minimalist is making a profound error if she sees departures from some abstract libertarian ideal as an unfortunate falling away that could be corrected by (say) a sufficiently diligent libertarian citizenry, or a set of appropriately empowered founding officials. This is because functioning markets require state institutions such as control over currency, company law, incorporation acts, and so forth. All choices over what form these institutions take

are necessarily political choices: they are not choices within the market, but about how markets are to be formed and sustained. The very institutions that libertarians must demand if there is to be a functioning market economy can only be created by political choices. Accordingly, even if there is a subsequent falling away from starting libertarian ideals towards something else, this does not represent a regrettable descent into a messy, inefficient, and principle-degraded politics, away from the rarefied air of pure economic logic. Breathing that rarefied air (if so it be) was already a political choice. There is no pre-existing economy that politician's interference somehow disrupts because the modern economy is a political creation through and through.

More sophisticated advocates of minimalist state intervention in the modern economy in fact recognize this point, at least in part. Friedrich Hayek, for example, was clearly aware that state power was required to create and sustain markets, and that maintaining the advantages that he believed accrued from decentralized market systems required political decision-makers to exercise a kind of self-denying stance towards their own power: using it to create and sustain genuine markets, but refraining from then interfering *with* the market, or worse, trying to by-pass it through the use of political planning (Hayek 1960; cf. Mirowski 2013; Davies 2015). And it may well be the case, as some state-minimalists argue, that despite appearances markets are frequently more desirable than well-intentioned (but self-defeating) administrative intervention (Pennington 2015, 2017). But those latter are empirical matters, properly settled on a case-by-case basis, even if there are circumstances in which a default preference for favouring markets is a sensible enough strategy to begin with. In any case, what remains true, even if markets are indeed allowed to prevail over alternatives, is that any such decision remains thoroughly political: not a retreat from politics, but a particular choice about what form of politics will be allowed to prevail *within* the now dominant liberal state form. A coherent state minimalism must recognise itself to be about the particular

policies adopted by the contemporary liberal state, rather than a principled objection to the existence of the liberal state itself, or the championing of some fundamental alternative. This point matters, because in turn we should recognise that state minimalism will only ever exist in appearance, and only for as long as the political will to uphold it remains – which, given the pressures of jealousy of trade, is unlikely to be for very long. In turn, state minimalists ought not be surprised if they find that their erstwhile political heroes are not only unable to ‘roll back the state’, but transpire to be every bit as committed to the political domination of economics as their ideological rivals – albeit with different ambitions and results.

By focusing on the interplay of economics and politics, Hont helps us to gain a more textured understanding than Williams supplied of what we might mean by ‘modernity’ in a political context. Hont is surely right that insofar as ‘modern politics cannot ignore the economy, neither should political theory’ (Hont, 2005a: 2). But how to heed this stricture whilst engaging in what is still recognizably political theory, rather than (say) empirical political economy, or quantitative political science? One way forward is to attempt to gain an improved grip on what we might mean by ‘liberalism’, understood as a particular historical and political phenomenon, and specifically suited to a world in which the economy has become irreversibly political. Hont, it turns out, is an illuminating guide on this score. To see this we must turn to his analysis of the liberal state, or in his idiosyncratic locution, ‘the modern commercial republic’.

### **3. The Modern Commercial Republic**

Hobbes occupies a paradoxical place in Hont’s account. Lacking any meaningful theory of the economy, he figures as ‘the last of the post-Renaissance or “new humanist” theorists of politics’, i.e. falling just outside the scope of modern political theory (Hont, 2005a: 21). Nonetheless, Hobbes bequeathed to subsequent theorists the clearest

understanding of modern politics as founded upon the centralized authority structure of the state, a unified site of popular sovereignty which exercised final arbitration across a settled territory. The problem with Hobbes's vision of sovereignty, according to Hont, was that it was founded upon a vision of human beings as radically unsociable, a product of their over-weening desire for recognition in the eyes of others, which caused naturally-formed groupings to be highly combustible, as individuals and sub-groups attacked each other to secure preeminence. Hobbes's solution to this was the imposition of centralized absolute power as a unifying authority that could regulate natural unsociability. Later theorists, however, decoupled Hobbes's 'state' from this theory of extreme natural unsociability, and on Hont's account the most intellectually penetrating of these – Pufendorf, Hume, and Smith – did so by developing theories of 'commercial' sociability (Hont, 1994: 60-72; Hont, 2005a: 40-1, 101-11, 159-84). Commercial sociability theories claimed, against Hobbes, that competitive recognition seeking did not overwhelm the capacity for humans to co-operate in stable fashion via the pursuit of utility. Bonds formed via self-interest were weak compared to those of love or friendship, but they were nonetheless sufficient to hold large groups of individuals together, at least in propitious enough circumstances, if mutual advantage could be had through appropriate media of exchange. This emphasis on sociability as a product of the seeking of utility denied radical Hobbesian unsociability, but it did not thereby rely on an implausible degree of benevolent or virtuous conduct, plainly absent in large-scale social arrangements, but often touted by contemporaries as the 'moral' alternative to Hobbes's scepticism. As Adam Smith put it (and as Hont was fond of quoting) commercial sociability was the view that if individuals addressed each other not on the basis of 'humanity', but of 'self-love', then although the resulting society would be 'less happy and agreeable' than that based on benevolence, it would 'not necessarily be dissolved. Society may exist from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection' (Smith, 1976:

86; cf. Hont, 1994: 68-71; 2005, 39-40, 160-3). For Hont, it was ultimately the combination of Hobbes's vision of the state 'and commercial society that created the modern representative republic, our current state form, in the eighteenth century' (Hont, 2005a: 21).

A modern state that treated its subjects not as proud competitors for recognition who needed to be vigorously policed through the terror of Hobbes's 'publique sword', but as utility-seekers meeting for exchange with the aim of promoting their own interests (whilst also being capable of acting morally in the private sphere) evolved to be, on Hont's analysis, a very different political entity to anything that Hobbes had envisaged. Insofar as market interactions were admitted as being compatible with stable political governance, and gradually freed up and allowed to grow accordingly, the domestic economy developed in turn. As a result, the 'jealous gladiators' of the international arena were forced to interact with each other as trading states, not just war states, leading to the situation described in the above section: the impending threat of 'jealousy of trade'. One potential solution to 'jealousy of trade' was to try and opt out of the international state system that generated it altogether, namely by closing the borders of the state to external trade, hoping to operate a purely domestic economy. This option, that of the 'closed commercial state', meant, however, 'opt[ing] out of the modern world' (Hont, 2005a: 8, 155; cf. Nakhimovsky, 2011). This was because economic autarky forsook the advances that could only be gained through the benefits of trading based on comparative advantage, whilst forcibly restricting the liberty of domestic producers and consumers so as to try and block the intrusion of external market forces. The only option for states that did not attempt to opt their populations out of modernity via coercion was to be an 'open commercial state', i.e. one whose domestic economy traded with – and was therefore potentially undermined by – that of others.



On Hont's analysis, acceptance of an open commercial state, combined with a domestic economy geared towards production of goods that home and foreign consumers wished to acquire, meant the inauguration of an economy driven by what the eighteenth century termed 'luxury'. When not being used pejoratively, especially in an overtly moralized sense, luxury in eighteenth century usage referred (as it still does today) to those goods and services which were desired not for strict necessity, but to satisfy wants rather than needs (Hont, 2005b; cf. Berry 1994). Earlier political theorists – especially those in the 'republican' or 'civic humanist' tradition – had indicted luxury as the cause of moral and political corruption, tending to undermine the civic participation needed to secure freedom, and a dangerous source of military effeminacy and weakness (due especially to reliance on external mercenaries bought with the proceeds of luxury-generated wealth) that ultimately led to catastrophic vulnerability (Hont, 2005b). As every schoolboy knew, it was luxury that had destroyed the Roman Empire, the greatest military-political association ever known. However, actual experience of the conjunction of a luxury economy with the modern state taught astute eighteenth century observers that the old republican wisdom was wrong, or at any rate no longer applied (e.g. Mandeville, 1988; Hume, 1985; Melon, 1739; Montesquieu, 1989).<sup>6</sup> Modern commercial states did not rely upon the virtue of the citizenry or the hardiness of its militia, and so the threats putatively posed by luxury were not relevant to large European trading states. Luxury might fuel jealousy of trade, but it did not threaten to bring down the modern state from within. The brakes could be taken off, and the economy allowed to grow accordingly – indeed, would have to be allowed to grow, or else the state would court comparative economic decline, and hence international vulnerability.

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<sup>6</sup> Hume and Montesquieu strongly denied the schoolboy wisdom about Rome; Smith endorsed a radically more complex version of it.

On Hont's reading, the advent of luxury economies in large states operating centralized authority structures of sovereignty had a dramatic consequence. This was the advent of high levels of material inequality amongst different groups of citizens, the inevitable product of market allocations of resources, wherein winners secured and consolidated wealth, and left behind those who were less successful in economic competition. The modern commercial state, on Hont's analysis, became expressly an *unequal* arrangement in terms of the material assets of its members, and inevitably also in terms of the hierarchies of rank and status that tracked these developments (Hont, 2015: 132). Hont accordingly asked: 'should we assume that a plurality of political visions might suit the integration of politics and the market economy, or should we accept the idea that there is just one privileged state form, the modern representative republic, that has an elective affinity with markets?' (Hont, 2005a: 4). The answer to his own rhetorical question was undoubtedly the latter.

Specifically, Hont claimed that the modern state was a peculiar conjunction of an acceptance of the growth of material inequality amongst citizens arising out of luxury economies embedded in open commercial states, with an apparently paradoxical affirmation of the simultaneous equality of all citizens before the law, and hence as regards their status *as* citizens, with the correlate political rights that entailed. On this new outlook, 'what really mattered was not inequality but the decent living standard of all, including the poorest stratum of society':

This argument constituted the "paradox of commercial society". The economic efficacy of inequality was a paradox because it drove a wedge between the traditional egalitarian intuitions of Western moral thought and the guiding assumptions of modern political economy. The success of commercial society was counterintuitive to those who expected that political and economic equality must somehow proceed hand in hand. The new idiom suggested, instead, that legal and political equality could coexist with economic inequality without causing endemic instability in modern Western states. 'Liberalism', as this new political form came to be called in the next century, could even be defined by

the co-existence of political and legal equality and significant economic inequality in the very same polity and society. This was the truly modern feature of the “modern republics” that have emerged in the modern era, for traditional political wisdom assumed that republics had to be egalitarian, and democracies even more so (Hont, 2005a: 92, also 439-40, 443; cf. Hont, 2015: 70; Hont, 2009: 162; Dunn, 1994: 215).

This point was made by Kant (whom Hont, curiously, does not cite in his own support) when describing the features of what would come to be known, in the next century, as the liberal *Rechtsstaat*: ‘This uniform equality of human beings as subjects of states is...perfectly consistent with the utmost inequality of the mass in the degree of its possessions, whether these take the form of physical or mental superiority over others, or of fortuitous external property and of particular rights (of which there may be many)’. Whilst ‘the welfare of one depends very much on the will of the other...the one serves (the labourer) while the other pays, *etc.* Nevertheless, they are all equal as subjects *before the law*.’ (Kant, 1970: 75, emphasis in original).

The significance of Hont’s claim is that on his reading liberalism is inherently not an egalitarian political theory with regards to material distributions within a state. Liberalism may well be egalitarian with regards the essential moral and political worth of those recognised as citizens, and of their correlate political rights (as Kant was at pains to maintain). But that does not, if Hont’s historicizing analysis is correct, entail anything approaching egalitarianism in distributive terms. From the perspective of much contemporary Anglo-analytic political philosophy, this ought to be very striking, and potentially also troubling: so much recent normative theory is, after all, expressly liberal-egalitarian in its outlook and ambitions (e.g. and at a bare indicative minimum, Rawls, 1971, 1993; Dworkin, 1977, 2000; Raz, 1986; Sen, 2010, and their many emulators). But this risks constituting a major self-misunderstanding. Once liberalism is properly historicized, and if Hont’s analysis is correct, then in distributive terms ‘liberal-egalitarianism’ is a conjunction in severe tension with itself, at risk of being oxymoronic

(cf. Nelson, 2008: 115). We shall see below that the situation is not quite as dire as it threatens to be for those who wish to hold on to such a conjunction – but this is due to the importance of further historical factors, which need to be explicitly acknowledged.

Hont was aware that his claim was a direct challenge to the predominant discourse of liberal-egalitarian Anglo-analytic theory, which he signaled by declaring it ‘North American republicanism, now known under the misnomer of left-wing liberalism’ (Hont, 2015: 107). From Hont’s perspective, the *egalitarian* component of the contemporary liberal-egalitarian conjunction indicates that it is really a continuation of the older republican, or civic humanist, view that claims, against liberalism, that political-legal equality cannot be had (or at last cannot be meaningfully realised or exercised) when there is economic inequality. To modern eyes this looks ‘left-wing’ because we have come to associate calls for greater economic equality with an emphasis on material redistribution. In the longer historical view, however, it risks appearing – at least to the historically-sensitive observer – like a failure to understand the changed material circumstances of the modern open commercial state operating a luxury economy, i.e. the conditions which ground all of our present political problems and possibilities. In other words, on Hont’s outlook post-war Anglo-analytic political theory has largely failed to register the substance of modernity.

Yet the popularity of liberal-egalitarian theorizing, even if Hont’s analysis is correct, cannot be based simply on an apparent lack of historical knowledge amongst its typically astute and intelligent practitioners. After all, in modern western European states since the post-war period, significant redistributive measures *have* been undertaken at various ongoing points so as to rebalance the impact of market inequality, whilst welfare regimes now exist in all of the developed western nations, albeit with the United States constituting a significant partial exception. On Hont’s story of the modern commercial republic as an open commercial state based on a luxury economy, grounded ultimately in

sociability as a function of private utility-seeking to secure self-interest with no meaningful public role for benevolence in the allocation of resources, this may look perplexing. If an open commercial society is a competitive trading state, premised on Smith's dictum that it is 'not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest' (Smith, 1975: 27), why then do we see politically coordinated measures in place to mitigate the worst effects of the inequality that arises from citizens addressing themselves not to each other's benevolence, but to their self-interest?

Any adequate answer will necessarily be complex, and I can offer here only a broad and inadequate sketch, one that would require much properly historical substantiation to be made acceptable. Nonetheless, and working out of Hont's remarks on luxury (2005b), an answer might tentatively go as follows. Luxury-driven states must recognise that those who produce luxury goods – or what the nineteenth century came to term those employed in 'industry' – are highly vulnerable to fluctuations in market demand: if the market for baubles collapses, bauble-makers will, *ceteris paribus*, go hungry. But hungry people do not sit still: they may not only riot, but in the longer term agitate and organize politically to attempt to secure future relief via systematic reform, and if that is not forthcoming, engage in revolutionary activity to change the material circumstances of their society. With the threat of social unrest ever present, states operating luxury/industry economies are driven to introduce some welfare measures – i.e. collective relief programmes – as prophylactic measures, to try and shore up their own stability by protecting workers from the more extreme ravages of unchecked market forces. On this picture, some level of socially-organized welfare provision – even if only a minimal one whose function is primarily riot prevention – emerges as *intrinsically* part of

a luxury/industry economy in a more developed liberal state, with more extensive measures being put in place in more auspicious and politically-conducive circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

However there is a large difference between the advanced contemporary welfare states of e.g. Western Europe, and bare relief measures to keep the poor trading water during periods of economic downturn during (e.g.) the nineteenth century, when the political and social implications of the luxury economies that arose in the eighteenth century came into sharp relief. For a clue as to what has perhaps made the difference, however, we might turn to the historian Tony Judt:

[T]he twentieth-century 'socialist' welfare states were constructed not as an advance guard of egalitarian revolution but to provide a barrier against the return of the past: against economic depression and its polarizing, violent political outcome in the desperate politics of Fascism and Communism alike. The welfare states were thus *prophylactic* states. They were designed quite consciously to meet the widespread yearning for security and stability that John Maynard Keynes and others foresaw long before the end of World War II, and they succeeded beyond anyone's expectations. Thanks to a half-century of prosperity and safety, we in the West have forgotten the political and social traumas of mass insecurity. And thus we have forgotten why we have inherited those welfare states and what brought them about (Judt, 2008: 10).

There is also an affinity worth noting here between Hont's outlook and the argument recently made by the political economist Thomas Piketty, whose *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* argues that, if left unmolested, capitalist arrangements tend to concentrate and reinforce wealth, not only generating inequality, but exponentially increasing it. This process – so visible in the nineteenth century – was put on hold and partially reversed in the twentieth, due to the enormous impact of two world wars, and the generation of hugely centralized state power. This crucially took place alongside a willingness to implement solidaristic state action on behalf of the left behind, in times of crisis, and in the face of dangerous competitor ideologies, principally fascism and communism, which

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<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Mike Sonenscher for this point.

threatened the liberal capitalist arrangement from both without (via military aggression) and within (revolution).<sup>8</sup> Since the 1980s, however, the evident relative success of capitalism, and the disappearance of the specter of global war, has led to a return to the normal operation of capitalist arrangements, and on Piketty's analysis, this points to the likely decline of the 'social state' after the (it now transpires) highly anomalous period of *Les Trente Glorieuses*. The future is thus likely to see a return to the large and growing inequalities that marked the course of capitalism's progress in the nineteenth century, with only more minimalist relief measures in place, rather than full-blown welfare states coupled with redistributive economic policies (Piketty, 2013).

In other words, we can see redistributive politics and the rise of the welfare, or 'social', state, as a peculiar historic development of the twentieth century: a grafting onto open commercial states something that such arrangements would not have developed in the absence of deadly competitor ideologies and regimes. Again, to make good this bare sketch a proper historical analysis would have to be provided. But in the absence of that, we might nonetheless postulate that to fully understand the emergence of the modern welfare state, we will need to understand it as in part solving the problem of worker's uprisings that destabilized most European states in the nineteenth century, the period in which increased industry and commerce were not, or were no longer, improving the lives of the worst off in the ways that eighteenth century theorists such as Adam Smith had predicted that they would. Thus, Judt's suggestion that the contemporary welfare state only came about thanks to the enormous impact of World War II may need to be coupled with a recognition that its origins nonetheless lay in historical processes begun in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>8</sup> On this logic, we might add, the fact that the United States has never faced any serious internal threat from communist revolution, and experienced its fight with fascism at a considerable distance, helps explain why it never developed a welfare state on the scale of those found in e.g. Western Europe.

Yet if something approaching the above sketch is indeed right, what we seem to be able to say is that as a result of this confluence of factors, egalitarianism – or perhaps better, social democratic mitigation of the worst excesses of commercial inequality – *has* become part of the practice and ideology of many post-war liberals. As a result of this we can say that on a Hontian outlook liberal-egalitarianism is not, after all, oxymoronic, although it is still the uncomfortable marriage of two not naturally combined idioms, that remain in deep tension with each other. Insofar as liberal-egalitarianism is the dominant discourse within Anglo-analytic political theory, this would appear to be primarily a function of the prevailing *zeitgeist* in the post-war period amongst leftist intellectuals politically allied to the welfare state. Practitioners can, of course, continue to take such a stand on political (which in this case will include moral) grounds. But they should recognise the historical contingency of where they are coming from, and acknowledge the deep tensions inherent in the project of liberal egalitarian political philosophy, as revealed by recognizing the historical and contextual facts that provide the very materials that such a political theory must work with.

Where does this expanded Hontian analysis point us? Not to visions of liberalism that claim that it is validated by the pre-political rights inherently held by citizens, or by the need to respect and provide for the autonomy of rational equals, or to some variant on a philosophical argument for why an (idealized) form of liberalism is required because of its underlying moral superiority, especially in terms of distributive justice – and so on. On the contrary, the intelligibility of liberal (and perhaps also liberal-egalitarian) politics is grounded in a specific claim to historical success, or perhaps rather, the necessity of such arrangements to avoid a return to the horrors of the last century. In other words, to something like what Williams, following Shklar, called ‘the liberalism of fear’ (Williams, 2005: 3, 54-60; Shklar, 1998: 3-20). Liberalism as the least-worst option in a world of lethal political failures, where the emphasis is on damage control and the avoidance of



the cruelty and harm that politics can so easily slide into. Liberalism contrasted not with some imaginary ideal compared to which it inevitably falls short, but with real-world experienced alternatives – and which by that measure is found the most desirable form of political arrangement that we can presently opt and hope for, and should strive to uphold.

On Hont’s perspective the most relevant real-world alternative to liberalism in recent history, and due to the rise of the economy as a central factor of modern politics, is state-planned soviet communism. To put the matter in Hontian terms, this was an attempt to bypass commercial sociability by using the power of the state to artificially generate large-scale human cohesion via the directed production of material goods as a replacement for the market as a web of stable interactions, as well as of utility-promotion and -generation. This attempt to bypass commercial sociability – and thereby impose a different state form as a response to the rise of markets as a central fact of modern politics – was a colossal humanitarian disaster, requiring as it did severe political repression in order to systematically restrict the liberty of utility-seeking agents, as well as propping-up the naked economic inefficiency and attendant loss of welfare associated with the suppression of markets. In Hont’s words, the collapse of the communist regimes that began in 1989 ‘was no victory for Western moral and religious values. It was a victory of capitalism over socialism, the free market over planning and the “open” commercial state over the “closed” one’. (Hont, 2005: 155; cf. Dunn, 1994: 216-7).<sup>9</sup> The modern liberal state, due to its ‘elective affinity’ with markets, is what – in Williams’s terms – ‘makes sense’ to us ‘now and around here’, given the spectacular collapse of recent ideological competitors (Williams, 2005: 8-10). The reasons we have to support it

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<sup>9</sup> It is surely striking that Rawls (and many after him in the Anglo-analytic tradition) theorized only a closed nation-state, arguably showing how little he (or they) had learned from history, which if Hont is correct, reveals that the modern nation-state only arrived once commerce (and, therefore, politics) had become internationalized.

– and to try and mitigate the effects of the material inequality it fundamentally accepts – lie in the historical knowledge that we now possess about the deadly failure of competitor ideologies to do better. Certainly, a broad acceptance that the modern commercial republic has an elective affinity with the ubiquity of markets in contemporary politics does not mean simply ceding the field to an untrammelled free-market ideology advocating the complete absence of state planning or intervention. Social democratic ambitions to mitigate and reduce the brutalities of market competition – and the use of state planning accordingly – are not impugned simply because a total rejection of commercial sociability was proved by the Soviet regimes to be a humanitarian disaster. A leftist politics aiming to reduce the sufferings that capitalism necessarily brings about remains an entirely respectable intellectual and political position, perhaps to be still applauded and fought for. The point, however, is that such a politics is an alternative to be offered from *within* liberalism, not *to* it – and to be a realistic response to the immense challenges faced by modern populations, it had better understand the constraints imposed by the historical inheritance it must operate through.

Liberalism is by no means a perfect political arrangement, but on the metric of damage control in a world of competitive markets – providing that ‘jealousy of trade’ can be successfully tamed – it does incomparably better than its alternatives in the western tradition (cf. Dunn, 1994: 216-18, 225).<sup>10</sup> Philosophers can supplement this historical analysis with arguments from rights, autonomy, justice, and so forth, if they wish. But from Hont’s perspective – and that of Williams also (Sagar, 2016a: 373-4) – these do not

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<sup>10</sup> At least, for domestic populations. The conduct of liberal regimes towards those who are not its citizens is admittedly much poorer – but no form of political organization in human history has a good track record when it comes to treating outsiders. And compared to its most recent serious competitors, liberalism anyway still does rather better. There is of course a large question here about alternatives *outside* of the western tradition. Singapore is not liberal, and neither is China, and the success of both in recent decades is not unobvious. But as I have argued elsewhere (Sagar 2016), Williams’s political philosophy was constructed for us ‘now and around here’, and for the same reasons, Hont’s ought to be considered likewise. There is no acceptable universal theory of the best politics for humans; the best we can and should aspire to is a best account of how to do best with our politics. For a similar, and more comprehensive argument on this point: Levy, forthcoming.

get to the heart of the phenomenon under analysis, at least if left freestanding. This can only be done to a satisfactory degree by integrating normative political theory with the history of the ideas and arguments being employed, along with the relevant histories of the real-world politics that we are attempting to understand. Now and around here we find ourselves with deep ethical commitments to certain forms of politics, and in many cases we can reflect upon those and find that there are good reasons to place confidence in them. Hont's analyses complement, and help give supporting substance to, Williams's suggestion that an appropriate form of confidence in our political values will not come from abstract philosophical reflection alone. Instead of somehow validating our lived and inherited historical experiences from a position outside of them, and with alleged prior normative authority, philosophy's role on this picture emerges instead as one of seeking to help clarify and understand what we have inherited by subjecting it to careful reflection, in turn assisting us to decide what to go on endorsing, and what to try and leave behind (Hall 2014; Sagar 2016a).

#### **4. Republicanisms**

In Hont's 'modern commercial republic' all three components are important and interrelated (Hont, 2005: 7). 'Commercial' ought to be clear enough from what has been said, but 'modern' and 'republic' still require further unpacking. 'Modern' for Hont means not only a state operating a luxury-driven open economy, but refers specifically to the politics associated with the rise of large-territory regimes emerging from the feudal monarchies of Europe, most especially Britain and France, and eventually Germany and Italy after unification, as well as the emulation of large-state politics in former confederacy republics like Switzerland and the Netherlands. This matters, because Hont's story is specifically one about the rise of large states whose basis lay in what Adam Smith called the 'unnatural and retrograde' development of modern Europe, i.e.

economic and political modernity having to grow out of the feudal era which succeeded the Roman Empire, a story not primarily of the isolated city-states of Renaissance Italy and the Swiss mountains, but of the absolute monarchies that came to dominate the continent by the eighteenth century (Smith, 1975: 380; Hont, 2009: 162-8; Whatmore, 2012). Yet given precisely that these large European states were originally absolute monarchies, and developed along different lines to the Renaissance republican city-states or the early commercial republics like Amsterdam and Geneva, is it not oxymoronic to talk of the modern *republic*?

‘Republic’ conventionally referred not only to an arrangement that was either democratic or aristocratic in political rule, organised around the *libertas* of the citizen body not the command of a monarch, but also to an entity located only in a geographically favourable environment, i.e. one promoting relative economic self-sufficiency and easy military defence. Republics thus tended to be small-scale arrangements, typically meaning a city-state (Kaposy, 2002: 227-9). Be that as it may, on Hont’s story what changed in the eighteenth century was that thinkers such as Montesquieu, Hume, Smith, and Sieyès, reconfigured the conditions of meaning for the *res publica* so that it came to mean ‘not simply...collective government, or government by committee, but any form of government – by the one, the few, or the many – provided that it was a government of laws and not of men’ (Hont, 2015: 70). This meant that modern monarchies (i.e. large-territory centralized systems of hierarchical rule) could be validated as properly administered forms of political association, provided that they operated under what has come to be known as the rule of law (e.g. Hont, 2005a: 396; Hont, 2009: 155, 160; Hont, 2015: 70, 75). The great breakthrough of eighteenth century political thought, according to Hont, was that a *modern* republic could be understood simply in terms of it being law-governed – what the nineteenth century would christen the *Rechtsstaat* – and regardless of whether its precise form of governmental

administration was democratic, aristocratic, monarchical, or some mixture of the three. In Sieyès's later image, the modern republic could opt for a government that took the form of either a 'point' or a 'platform', that is either a single figurehead, like a constitutional monarch or president, or an assembly (Sieyès, 2003: 169; cf. Sonenscher, 2003: xxviii; Tuck, 2015: 121-80). Yet as a result, modern commercial republics based on luxury economies did not need to enforce the relatively rigid social and economic egalitarianism that pre-modern republican theory had thought so necessary, and in turn they licensed the affirmation of legal equality in the face of (as Kant put it) the utmost inequality of possessions. On Hont's analysis, theorizing this entity was the most significant achievement of eighteenth century political thought (Hont, 2005a: 92; Hont, 2009: 162, 166; Hont, 2015: 70-5).

If on Hont's reading of the foundations of modern political thought, contemporary 'left-wing liberalism' is revealed as crypto-republicanism, what then of the recent resurgence – led by Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit – of openly republican political theory (e.g. Pettit, 1997; 2012; Skinner, 1991; 2008a)? Skinner and Pettit may be read as intentionally dissenting from the conditions of modernity, seeking to return us to a political theory based on an understanding of liberty, in Skinner's phrase, 'before liberalism', emanating from the republican tradition that Hobbes in particular did much to eclipse (e.g. Skinner, 1998; 2008b). In the important philosophical and historical work done by Pettit, Skinner, and their supporters over the past two decades, a distinctive 'third' concept of liberty – understood as the absence of the potential for arbitrary domination or unauthorized interference – must now be recognised as a conceptual possibility, alongside the more well-established (at least in recent times) 'negative' and 'positive' understandings. Such 'republican' liberty has in turn been suggested as the basis for an alternative form of political theory – an avowedly republican (Pettit), or neo-Roman (Skinner) approach – which rejects liberalism for its faulty understanding of what

freedom consists in, and the material conditions required for that to be properly realized. In the process, republican political theory aspires towards a more participatory, and hopefully less domination-filled, form of social organization than our present liberal arrangements appear to permit, or even encourage.

Yet from Hont's perspective this regression to a pre-modern form of political theory is unwelcome. This is because 'republican' freedom was traditionally – due to the need to secure non-domination for the *civitas* in a realm of hostile neighbours – a prime contributor to justifications couched in the idiom of reason of state, and thus an inherently bellicose political theory when it came to international relations. The advent of the modern commercial economy means that republicanism in the modern age becomes, in Hont's terms, 'neo-Machiavellian'. This entails driving states directly into 'jealousy of trade', as the logic of military superiority becomes entangled with that of economic competition (Hont, 2005a: 185-266). As John Robertson has summarised:

Hont agrees with Skinner that Hobbes offered the most searching political critique of the neo-Roman concept of liberty as justifying external aggression as well as internal disorder. Still more powerful, however, was the critique mounted by the eighteenth-century political economists, when they identified the neo-Roman, neo-Machiavellian approach to commerce with wars of conquest and empire. Properly understood, Hume and Smith argued, liberty of commerce entailed competition, but this was not the "jealousy of trade" advocated by the neo-Machiavellians...[O]n that historical trajectory, Hont implies, neo-Roman "liberty" was hardly a desirable alternative to modern "liberalism." Better by far to stick with the tough-minded, skeptical understanding of political and commercial liberty offered by Hobbes and the Scottish economists (Robertson, 2006: 942-3).

Hont's claim that the liberal state is the modern commercial republic is thus a two-pronged attempt to deny the validity of a classical republican revival for contemporary conditions. On the one hand, the modern republic emerges on Hont's reading as being just as concerned with liberty as the old – but with liberty now conceived of in terms of the *Rechtsstaat* and the guarantees provided by law and state institutions rather than the

military capacity to resist external domination, and in the context of a European history in which commerce (as Hume and Smith forcefully argued) created modern liberty through its unintended, but effective, destruction of the post-Roman systems of feudal domination and absolute monarchy (Hont, 2009; Hont, 2005a: 155). On the other, from Hont's perspective no return to a classical conception of republicanism ought to seem attractive when we understand that in a world of economic competition, neo-Machiavellian politics will make not for universal *libertas*, but extensive domination and aggression through attempts to secure *grandezza* via the enormous resources available to large-territory, fiscal-military war machines, able to tap into the vast credit enabled by the innovation of public debt (Hont, 2005a: 325-53). The point here is similar to that made against libertarianism above. Namely, that if Hont's analysis is right, then republican liberty in the international arena cannot be decoupled from reason of state, and with the advent of commerce, therefore from jealousy of trade. Given that international relations and commercial competition are irreducible facts of political modernity, to imagine large-territory European states organised around principles of classical republicanism, that nonetheless enjoy relatively peaceful international coexistence, is to entertain a fantasy. In actuality, to be committed to the principles of classical republicanism in the modern world is, implicitly or otherwise, to be committed to a politics of war and aggression. Insofar as one rejects those, one ought also to reject classical republicanism, and adopt some variant on the politics of the modern commercial republic, i.e. some form of liberalism.

### **5. Conclusion: The Role of History**

Hont's analysis is powerful, and seductive, for those who think that history ought to play a greater role in contemporary normative theorizing about the modern liberal state. Yet we ought nonetheless to conclude by bring into focus a problem that has been lurking

beneath the surface of all that has been said so far. Namely, that Hont principally offers an *intellectual* history of the eighteenth century; an account of what the great thinkers of that time claimed about the world they lived in. Yet it does not follow that these thinkers were *right* in what they claimed. This raises a general problem: if we want more historically sensitive political theory, why ought we to turn to the history of political thought rather than (say) the history of economic development, or of European statecraft and diplomacy, or of institutional legislative and judicial arrangements, etc.?

Indeed, it is notable that those thinkers that Hont draws upon who themselves frequently used history to forward their political theories – notably Montesquieu and Smith, but also Hume and Rousseau – did not primarily employ the history of political thought, but rather made claims about the concrete social, political, religious, commercial (and so on) development of (in particular) European societies, from antiquity to the present. If we aim to learn better ways of doing political theory by looking to the examples set by past thinkers, then a key lesson of the eighteenth century would seem to be that historically sensitive political theory must engage with full-blooded historical analysis of social change, not (just) the history of political ideas. Connectedly, even if we think that the eighteenth century figures that Hont draws upon were correct in their conclusions, it cannot be enough to appeal to their authority alone. Genuine historical substantiation will have to be deployed to confirm that what they claimed was true then, or that the likely implications of their frameworks have indeed come to pass now, along with whatever intervening history must also be told in the process. That means, again, going beyond the history of political thought and into concrete histories of the phenomena under analysis, towards which I have only gestured in the vaguest of terms above.

The challenge of how the history of political thought can be relevant to contemporary political theory is a general one that must be faced up to by anybody



proposing to use the former to improve the latter.<sup>11</sup> A partial response in defence of using Hont's work (or at least, of my reading of Hont) is that he helps us to recover a more historically sensitive way of doing political theory, and that this, for the reasons outlined at the close of the previous section, is valuable and important. It also means, however, that we cannot stop with Hont, and that the task for realist theorists who wish to incorporate history may be daunting indeed, given the breadth, volume, and difficulty of the materials that will have to be incorporated. It may also mean that (some) realist political theory ends up looking much less like philosophy than the majority of what has dominated Anglo-analytic political theory in recent decades (Sagar, 2016a: 381-2). There is nothing necessarily wrong with that, and indeed there is every reason to suppose that an important place will remain for philosophy alongside other relevant humanistic concerns, as Williams consistently insisted (Hall, 2014; 2017). But it ought to be acknowledged up front that realism may at times have to depart considerably from the orthodoxies of the discipline if it is to live up to its own billing. It might also be added that one thing that we can learn from the history of political thought – and that of the eighteenth century in particular – is how first rank thinkers went about synthesizing historical claims with political theoretic arguments, and thus how to improve our own historical understanding of political modernity. Hont is again a useful guide, insofar as he shows with great insight how this was done by, in particular, the best thinkers of the eighteenth century. Yet this can only be one part of the puzzle, and his work and his approach will need to be complemented by that and those of others, in a task that will take a great deal of collaborative and individual endeavour to even begin to undertake satisfactorily.

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<sup>11</sup> I am most grateful to Robin Douglass and Rob Jubb, who helped me to see the significant difficulty of this problem, as well as suggesting some ways to begin grappling with it.

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