

## Dr Istvan Hont

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### 'Luxury and the route to revolution in Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*'

Istvan Hont was born in Hungary and educated in Budapest at the King Stephen I Gymnasium and the University of Budapest. He began his undergraduate studies in Engineering, before changing to History and Philosophy, in which he completed his MA and his doctorate in 1974. His thesis, supervised by Professor Eva Balázs, was on 'David Hume and Scotland'. He was then appointed a Research Officer in the Institute of History in the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, where his duties included making summaries of the *Economic History Review*, which then occupied the place in historical studies to which *Past and Present* now pretends; he thus acquired his encyclopaedic knowledge of modern economic and social history. In 1975, with the assistance of M.M. Postan, Istvan and his wife Anna took the brave decision to leave Hungary, and to re-start his academic career in the United Kingdom. Istvan went first to Oxford, where he continued his study of the Scottish Enlightenment and Hume's political economy under Hugh Trevor-Roper; in 1977 he was appointed to the Research Fellowship in Intellectual History at Wolfson College, Oxford. In 1978 he moved across to King's College, Cambridge, to direct the newly-established Research Centre project on 'Political Economy and Society 1750-1850', along with Michael Ignatieff. During the six years of the project he organised a series of ground-breaking conferences, whose highlights included a rare (possibly unique) public exchange between Duncan Forbes and John Pocock, and the participation of Reinhart Koselleck and other leading exponents of *Begriffsgeschichte*.

Between 1986 and 1989 he was in the United States, as an Assistant Professor at Columbia, after which he returned definitively to Cambridge and to King's, as University Lecturer then Reader in Political Thought in the Faculty of History. Over the years he has taken a leading role in teaching the history of political thought, by strenuous undergraduate lecturing and by contributions to the M.Phil.; he is a committed exponent of the merits of the Cambridge approach to the subject. He has also held visiting appointments at Princeton, Chicago and Harvard, Göttingen, Budapest, Chiba University, Japan, and, most recently, Jena; and between 2001 and 2004 he held a Leverhulme Trust Major Research Fellowship.

The first of the King's College Research Centre conferences formed the basis of the volume *Wealth and Virtue. The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (1983), to which Istvan contributed two continuously-influential papers, 'The "rich country – poor country" debate in Scottish classical political economy' and (with Michael Ignatieff) 'Needs and Justice in the *Wealth of Nations*'. Over the next three decades these were followed by major articles on natural law and the language of sociability, the 'economic limits to national politics', Hume's treatment of public credit, and the nation-state and nationalism in eighteenth-century perspective, the last of which was awarded the annual prize of the Political Studies Association of the UK. Article-length in form, each of these was intellectually a book in embryo, treating its subject with an originality which transformed understanding of its significance. The publication in 2005 of the (also prize-winning) *Jealousy of*

*Trade* performed the invaluable service of collecting most of these pieces; with its long introduction, however, it was also, in effect, a new book – an argument that it was eighteenth-century political economy (in particular that of Hume and Smith), rather than nineteenth-century economics and politics, which established the framework for modern thinking about international politics. Since its publication there have been further original studies of the eighteenth-century luxury debate and of the importance of Adam Smith's treatment of ancient republicanism. His major preoccupation continues to be the post-Hobbesian theme of unsocial sociability in eighteenth-century thought; recently this has led him to explore the extent of the common ground between Rousseau and Adam Smith, the subject of the Carlyle Lectures in Oxford in 2009 and the (different) Benedict Lectures in Boston in 2010. The paper for the Cambridge Seminar develops this line of enquiry.

### Major Publications

*Jealousy of Trade. International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005) (Contains all his major articles to that date).

'The early Enlightenment debate on commerce and luxury', in Mark Goldie & Robert Wokler (eds), *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 379-418.

'The "rich country – poor country" debate revisited: the Irish origins and French reception of the Hume paradox', in Carl Wennerlind and Margaret Schabas (eds), *David Hume's Political Economy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 243-323.

'Adam Smith's history of law and government as political theory', in Richard Burke and Raymond Geuss (eds), *Political Judgement. Essays for John Dunn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 131-171.

### Abstract

The paper is not about Rousseau's relationship to the French Revolution of 1789 or to any other 'real' revolution, in France, in Geneva, or anywhere else. Rather it is an investigation of the causes and nature of the imagined revolutions that figure in the last section of Rousseau's conjectural history of government in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. The *Discourse on Inequality* was a 'History of Civil Society'. In it Rousseau lavished a great deal of attention on the origins of the state. Nonetheless, he followed a well-established genre, in which the entire career of the state had to be sketched out, from the beginning to the end. No state was supposed to be ever-lasting and therefore its end and dissolution was as much a part of its story as its origins and mid-life career. Rousseau's theory of revolutions was part and parcel of his account of the dissolution of the state. Like all theory, it had both explanatory and predictive power. Nonetheless, in the first instance it should be read as theoretical history rather than political prognostication. The purpose of this essay is to throw new light on Rousseau's theory of state dissolution and uncover its connection to his general history of economic inequality. It proposes, heuristically, a reading of Rousseau 'History of Civil Society' backwards, deductively rather than inductively.