***Commerce and Peace in the Enlightenment,* ed. Béla Kapossy, Isaac Nakhimovsky and Richard Whatmore, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, 362 pp., £75 (hardback), £21.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781108403979.**

Max Skjönsberg, University of St Andrews

mss5@st-andrews.ac.uk

Istvan Hont (1947-2013) was undeniably one of the most influential intellectual historians in Britain of the past few decades, as the number of festschriften in recent years attest. *Commerce and Peace in the Enlightenment* is edited by some of Hont’s doctoral students and includes contributions from a generation of scholars he supervised, taught or inspired, mainly at the University of Cambridge, where he spent the greater part of his career. It should be considered together with *Markets, Morals, Politics* (Harvard University Press, 2018)*,* put together by the same group of editors plus Sophus Reinert, and which includes contributions from Hont’s peers, among them John Dunn, Richard Tuck and Gareth Stedman Jones. The only overlap besides the Introductions is Michael Sonenscher, Hont’s Cambridge colleague, who has written an afterword to the present volume.

Hont’s research engaged with the interplay between political economy and international relations with particular focus on eighteenth-century Europe. In 2008 and 2009, he organised two workshops on commerce and perpetual peace (3-4), out of which the present volume is spun.Hont never published a monograph in his lifetime. Instead he is best known for editing (with Michael Ignatieff) *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (1983) and for his own essay collection *Jealousy of Trade* (2005). To the latter, he wrote a 150-page introduction, which functions as an outline and a synthesis of his extensive research into questions of sociability, economic thought, nationalism and transnational competition.

In the spirit of Hont, *Commerce and Peace* is not intended as a work exclusively about the past, but seeks (usually indirectly) to shed light on ‘the extent to which enlightenment controversies continue to influence and illuminate politics and society today’ (4). A politically minded historian, Hont firmly believed that we should study past political thought in order to understand modern politics. ‘Why else would you do it?’ he once told his friend and colleague Raymond Geuss.[[1]](#footnote-1) This strand in his thinking appears to have become more pronounced in his later years. In his posthumous *Politics in Commercial Society,* Hont ingeniously but hyperbolically said that modern politics is a combination of the respective visions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith.[[2]](#footnote-2) The same confidence infuses *Jealousy of Trade*. Hont was convinced that it is the eighteenth century, and especially the contributions of the Scots David Hume and Smith, to which we have to turn to best understand the modern world. As Geuss points out, Hont’s ‘mitigated scepticism’ (adopted from Hume) certainly did not extend to him doubting his own scholarly commitments.[[3]](#footnote-3) The chief boon of the writings of Hume and Smith, according to Hont, is that they viewed politics and the economy as inseparable and thought and wrote about them together (on this, see also 337-45). This approach Hont contrasted with the purely political and economic approaches of Machiavelli and Marx respectively. As Hume wrote in an essay originally entitled ‘Of Liberty and Despotism’ (1741): ‘Trade was never esteemed an affair of state till the last century’.[[4]](#footnote-4) As the 2018 trade war between the US and China shows, it has remained an affair of state ever since.

Although much of Hont’s research was occupied with Hume and Smith, his modus operandi was not canonical but contextual. He is rightly celebrated for recovering thinkers and texts which may be lesser known and often ignored today, not out of antiquarianism but for the sake of their past import. Great examples here are Fénelon’s *Telemachus* and Charles Davenant’s economic writings at the turn of the eighteenth century. With essays on Isaac de Pinto (by Koen Stapelbroek), Cesare Beccaria (by Reinert), and Karl Ludwig von Haller (by Béla Kapossy), none of whom are likely to feature on many history course syllabi at least in the Anglophone world, *Commerce and Peace* does great justice to this aspect of Hont’s legacy. In fact, apart from the Introduction, none of the essays in *Commerce and Peace* are about Hume or Smith, and only one directly addresses the area of studies commonly known as the Scottish Enlightenment (Iain McDaniel’s very interesting essay on the afterlife of Andrew Fletcher’s thought in the second half of the eighteenth century). Richard Whatmore’s contribution discusses an outside (chiefly Genevan) perspective on Scotland at the end of the eighteenth century (236-41) – a teaser of his ‘The End of Enlightenment’ project. Most of the essays in the collectionare eighteenth-century focused (as *Enlightenment* in its title indicates), even though it starts with a James Harrington essay by Mark Somos and ends in the twentieth century with Duncan Kelly’s contribution, which itself ranges from John Locke to Carl Joachim Friedrich.

Intentionally, many of the chapters in *Commerce and Peace* overlap with Hont’s work. A case in point is Isaac Nakhimovsky’s essay on Voltaire’s and Frederick the Great’s *Anti-Machiavel,* a key text singled out by Hont in *Jealousy of Trade.* Nakhimovsky places the work in the context of the dramatis personae of the Hontian universe, including Fénelon, Colbert and Jean-François Melon. He adds to the roster by introducing Marquis d’Argenson, who is only briefly mentioned in the last essay of *Jealousy of Trade.* The rationale behind *Anti-Machiavel,* Nakhimovsky argues, was to strike a balance between the moral pessimism of *The Prince* and the optimism of *Telemachus,* and to moderate rather than condemn the self-interest of the ruler (56). *Anti-Machiavel* is thus best read as a revision and not a rejection of reason of state, whereby princes are advised to abandon glory-seeking military expeditions and instead concentrate on the welfare of their peoples in an age of commerce (62, 77). An interesting aspect of the essay is the rift Nakhimovsky describes between Voltaire and Frederick, with the latter wanting to make space for conquest (in the interest of the people rather than princely ambition) in anti-Machiavellian politics (69). This suggests that there may not have been as much distance between Frederick the philosopher-king and the warlike prince as is sometimes assumed. In a secret *Political Testament* from 1752, Frederick admitted that ‘Machiavelli is right’: offence was sometimes the only way to *mantenere lo stato* in global power politics (73).

Reinert’s essay treats the Italian legal reformer Beccaria, who was widely read and cited in the eighteenth century (and by Michel Foucault in the twentieth century). Although Beccaria is not mentioned in *Jealousy of Trade,* the essay develops one of Hont’s fascinating findings: that the original ‘socialists’ in the eighteenth century were followers of Samuel von Pufendorf, who, in opposition to Hobbes’s nature-government dichotomy, theorised ‘society’ and were thus ‘society-ists’.[[5]](#footnote-5) In Reinert’s independent story, he demonstrates that ‘socialist’ in the eighteenth century was a derogatory term and first used in vernacular print in relation to Beccaria’s *On Crimes and Punishments* (1762). A socialist in this censure was a proponent of commercial society, who believed ‘that political economy trumped theology as a matrix for social organization’ (128). Socialism, in other words, was coined ‘to critique gradual secular reformism’ (152), and Beccaria in particular. This must surely count as one of intellectual history’s most unexpected ironies, worthy of further study.

Like Reinert, Eva Piirimäe’s contribution deals with the question of sociability, whose significance for eighteenth-century thought Hont did so much to establish. Looking at Herder’s criticism of his teacher Kant’s *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1784), Piirimäe’s returns to Kant’s ‘Hobbesian moment’ discussed in *Jealousy of Trade.*[[6]](#footnote-6)Because of what Kant theorised as humans’ unsocial sociability, ‘man [was] an animal *who needs a master*’, in the shape of unlimited sovereign power (163). In the lion’s share of the essay, Piirimäe looks closely at Herder’s response to Kant, with the latter’s reading of humanity being more optimistic and defending natural sociability (165). General struggle between peoples was not natural but a relatively late development in history, after human beings had transformed their natural way of life, according to Herder. Piirimäe goes on to argue that Herder followed Hume, Smith, and William Robertson in emphasising the importance of the growth of the cities in post-Carolingian Northern Europe, places where trade flourished and property was secure under the rule of law (189-90). This ties in with Hont’s description of Smith’s historical vision of Europe’s double (and retrograde) history, the first phase being southern and Roman and the second northern and German, with modern liberty originating in the second period.[[7]](#footnote-7)

*Commerce and Peace* does us a great service by presenting new research on primarily non-canonical figures and providing a thicker context for enlightenment debates about international competition. The only criticism worth mentioning is that it is something of a missed opportunity in that, besides the useful overview in the Introduction, there are no essays which *directly* treat the writings of the likes of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre, Rousseau, Kant, Jeremy Bentham, and Friedrich von Gentz, all of whom wrote essays on perpetual peace, nor are there essays on traditional sources of eighteenth-century political economy (such as Melon, the Physiocrats, Cameralism, James Steuart, and Adam Smith). Emer de Vattel, author of the chief work on *ius gentium* in the eighteenth century, only makes two brief appearances. Unlike Hont’s own work, then, and unlike the monographs of his many disciples in the volume, this essay collection at times seems peripheral to the central questions. Although all essays are exciting, enlightening and worth reading in their own right, and despite broad areas of commonality, *Commerce and Peace* is ultimately neither as tightly focused nor as punch-packing as its subject merits. In contrast with *Wealth and Virtue,* it is unlikely to set the agenda of research in the history of political thought for the coming decades. Many of the essays, as has been pointed out, are extremely valuable elaborations and refinements of seeds sown by Hont. This is not an indictment, because as an homage to the legacy of one of the great intellectual historians, and a selection of new research of some of the top scholars of political thought, *Commerce and Peace* does an excellent job, and it warrants careful reading and study from cover to cover.

**Bibliography:**

Bourke, Richard, ‘Revising the Cambridge School: Republicanism Revisited’, *Political Theory,* 46 (3), 2018, 467-77.

Geuss, Raymond, ‘Istvan Hont, 1947-2013’, Intellectual History Archive, St Andrews, *intellectual-history:151.*

Hont, Istvan, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).

Hont, Istvan, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith* (Cambridge, MA, 2015).

Hume, David, *Essays: Moral, Political Literary* (Indianapolis, IN, 1987).

Sonenscher, Michael, ‘István Hont (1947-2013)’, Intellectual History Archive, St Andrews, *intellectual-history:150.*

1. Raymond Geuss, ‘Istvan Hont, 1947-2013’, Intellectual History Archive, St Andrews, *intellectual-history:151.* First published in *The Point Magazine* and reprinted in Geuss, *Reality and Its Dreams* (Cambridge, MA, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), 23. For discussion, see Richard Bourke, ‘Revising the Cambridge School: Republicanism Revisited’, *Political Theory,* 46 (3), 2018, 467-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Geuss, ‘Istvan Hont’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hume, ‘Of Civil Liberty’, in *Essays: Moral, Political Literary* (Indianapolis, IN, 1987), 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 2005),44, 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hont, *Jealousy of Trade,* 137-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. On this, see Michael Sonenscher, ‘István Hont (1947-2013)’, Intellectual History Archive, St Andrews, *intellectual-history:150*, 9-10. First published in Economies et sociétés, série PE *(Histoire de la pensée*

*economique*). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)