

剑桥政治思想史原著系列（影印本）

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

休谟政治论文集

Hume

Political

Essays

Edited by

KNUD

HAAKONSSEN

中国政法大学出版社

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DAVID HUME
Political Essays

剑桥政治思想史原著系列

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在政治理论领域，“剑桥政治思想史原著系列”作为主要的学生教科丛书，如今已牢固确立了其地位。本丛书旨在使学生能够获得从古希腊到 20 世纪初期西方政治思想史方面所有最为重要的原著。它囊括了所有著名的经典原著，但与此同时，它又扩展了传统的评价尺度，以便能够纳入范围广泛、不那么出名的作品。而在此之前，这些作品中有许多从未有过现代英文版本可资利用。只要可能，所选原著都会以完整而不删节的形式出版，其中的译作则是专门为本丛书的目的而安排。每一本书都有一个评论性的导言，加上历史年表、生平梗概、进一步阅读指南，以及必要的词汇表和原文注解。本丛书的最终目的是，为西方政治思想的整个发展脉络提供一个清晰的轮廓。

本丛书已出版著作的书目，请查阅书末。

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE
HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

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For Eric

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Introduction

The politics of David Hume's lifetime, 1711–76, is often seen as the 'growth of stability', as the shoring up of the complacent British *ancien régime* and the securing of the first British empire. These perceptions are by no means entirely changed if we look at the period through Hume's eyes, but they are significantly modified. Hume's writings on politics, especially his essays, convey a sense of the fragility and uncertainty of the politics that created the high-Georgian establishment of his later years. And when he died in the late summer of 1776, he had clear premonitions of the jolt that this establishment was about to receive from across the Atlantic. Hume's understanding of the transitory nature of politics was not only the result of his acute observation of Britain and Europe and his unusual historical sense; it was also based on a complex political philosophy, a crucial point of which was that public opinion is fundamental to all political authority. This convergence of political observation, historical insight and philosophical theory formed Hume's political opinion. By publishing it, he hoped to have a formative influence on the public opinion that was constitutive of politics. At the same time he presented posterity with a particularly inviting, if difficult, task of interpretation.

Hume's political situation

When Hume was born, Britain was still ruled by a daughter of the last Stuart king. Queen Anne, like her sister Mary before her, offered some comfort to those who saw the removal of James II at the Revolution in 1689 as sacrilege against the doctrine of the indefeasible hereditary right of succession in kings. It took a long time to get

rid of the idea that only direct descendants of the Stuarts could be considered kings *de jure*, and that the most Parliament could do was to provide *de facto* replacements to meet temporary difficulties, such as incurable Catholicism in the rightful heir. The Act of Settlement had already determined in 1701 that upon the death of Anne, the Elector of Hanover would succeed to the crown. But this experiment in founding a dynasty – not just an interim monarch – upon an act of Parliament began in earnest only with the succession of George I in 1714. Its experimental nature was underlined by a number of attempts by the Old Pretender, the son of James II, and, eventually, by the next Stuart, the Young Pretender, to invade Britain. While posterity can see that these attempts never provided any serious threat to the new regime, mainly because the necessary French support never came in sufficient strength, this was not so evident to contemporaries. Even the last insurrection in 1745 was considered very dangerous, and the reaction against it was so strong that Hume thought it imprudent to publish his essay ‘Of the Protestant succession’ in 1748.

Despite the continuing Jacobite threat, the constitutional provision of rule by the King-in-Parliament was widely accepted long before the Forty-five. But this acceptance may have derived more from the necessity of getting on with governing than from an understanding of the nature of the new government. The political nation was still divided by the party rhetoric of the seventeenth century, which made Tories pretend that England was a divine-right monarchy and Whigs that it had an ancient mixed constitution protecting the people’s rights. The former had to see the Revolution settlement as a subversion of the king’s rights; the latter would naturally tend to see the crown’s management of business through ministerial members of Parliament as a dangerous extension of the executive prerogative. Yet these perceptions were quickly thrown into confusion by political circumstances. During the first twenty years after the Revolution, the monarchs, deterred by Whig suspicion of executive power, chose a large number of their ministers from among the Tories, thus gradually reconciling the latter to the new regime. By the same token, it was by a hitherto unimagined efficiency in executing the king’s business in Parliament that the Whigs, under Sir Robert Walpole, eventually gained ascendancy in the 1720s and 1730s. The old party lines and ‘principles’ thus provided less and less of a clue to the conduct of

politics, which was in fact dominated by the opposition between 'Court' and 'Country' interests.

Just like 'Tory' and 'Whig', the 'Court' and 'Country' labels did not denote clearly defined and organised parties. They referred to shifting constellations of interests, policies and principles represented by changing alliances of individuals and groups, often connected by family ties. At the heart of the Court-side of politics was the convergence of the interests of executive government and of commerce. Put simply, the government needed more money, mainly for the public service, public works and foreign policy, than it was politically possible to get out of Parliament in the form of taxes. But clever ministers, and especially Walpole, could manage Parliament so that the government was allowed to borrow money from its citizens. Such money was most readily available from the 'monied' (finance) sector, whose investment interests, including monopolies and overseas trading privileges, the government consequently looked after. While the Court interest thus was closely linked with city-centred monied wealth, it had to secure itself in Parliament by looking after members who often came from rural constituencies. Among many methods of doing this, a common and controversial one was the dispensation of patronage in the form of public offices.

For the Country opposition all of this was simply corruption. The people were being corrupted by the 'luxury' – consumerism – promoted by commerce. Private interest was being put above public good; patriotism was waning; and the country would soon be defensible only by the hiring of mercenary forces. Monied wealth was in itself a corrupt form of property because it, in contrast to landed wealth, could flee the country at any time and thus carried none of the responsibility for the common good of the country. Furthermore, government was being corrupted into basing its policy upon money of a merely imagined worth, namely, paper representing values still to be produced by the nation in the future. The constitution itself was being corrupted by crown manipulation of Parliament through 'placemen' and through extending each Parliament from three to seven years. During Hume's youth this Country opposition made use of an eclectic mixture of ideas; on the one hand, old or 'real' Whig notions of the ancient constitution, popular representation and rights; on the other hand, neo-republican or 'Commonwealth' ideas of civic virtue and the landed basis for proper authority. Added to these

ingredients were Tory traditionalism and rural suspicions of the ways of the urban world.

While the Country opposition to some extent was a spontaneous reaction to the conduct of politics, Lord Bolingbroke in particular strove to make it into a coherent force, using his periodical the *Craftsman* as a mouthpiece. The Court establishment also used able pens, including that of Daniel Defoe, to articulate its basic argument, namely that it was the force implementing the unique constitutional principles of the English Revolution and securing the rights of Englishmen. It was this that enabled Britons to make full use of the opportunities provided by modern commerce and created the wealth that alone would provide Britain with her security.

The question of security was not an idle one. When Hume was born, Britain was fighting the most devastating of a string of connected wars that had begun well before the Revolution. All of them were concerned with confining France so that a balance could be maintained between the major powers. Britons, then as later, feared more than anything else a 'universal monarchy', that is a Europe dominated directly or indirectly by one monarch in the despotical style of the East or the imperial style of ancient Rome. These fears were of course increased by the Catholicism of the contenders for European predominance. When Louis XIV was finally defeated, the Peace of Utrecht in 1714 secured Britain a quarter century of peace, the longest such period in the eighteenth century. Those were the years of Hume's childhood and youth; by contrast his middle years were darkened by major European wars, the War of the Austrian Succession, 1740-8, and the Seven Years War, 1756-63.

These wars were, of course, not only about domination of the European continent but also about control of the ocean and about colonies, that is, about trade. In the Europe which Hume observed so keenly, national fortunes were increasingly dependent upon international trade, and this led not only to wars but to a rethinking of the very idea of national wealth and empire. What was the relationship between this constantly changing, ill-defined phenomenon called commerce – or 'traffick' in the contemporary phrase – and solidly earth-bound agriculture, between both and money, which in the eighteenth century meant bullion, between all of these and the highly abstract credit represented by paper bills? The common opinion, often later referred to as mercantilism, was that wealth consists in

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money, and that foreign trade accordingly should be aimed at creating a surplus of exports paid for in specie. The French physiocrats, in contrast, regarded wealth as reducible to the production of the soil and were generally suspicious of trade. Such ideas inevitably led to speculations about the relationship between countries with a surplus to trade with and those without, between rich commercial and poor agricultural countries.

The eighteenth century increasingly saw history in linear terms; as a matter of a progression or development through a number of social, economic and political stages. Commonly, thinkers operated with one or two pre-agricultural stages of hunters, gatherers and nomads, followed by agriculture and, mainly in recent European history, commerce. But this linear view, which has many ancient precursors, was often, so to speak, crossed by other old ideas of cycles and corruption. Put simply, the questions were whether a commercial society could continue to progress and perhaps become more and more dominant over its poorer neighbours, or whether the poorer agricultural countries would catch up and, by taking up manufacturing, would undermine an advanced commercial society by underselling it through lower wages.

This problem was very close to home for the young Hume. Having suffered starvation in the 1690s, Scotland had tried and failed disastrously to break out of poverty through a colonial trade adventure, the Darien project. When the Union of England and Scotland in 1707 created Great Britain, there was a wide-ranging public debate about the economic discrepancy between the riches of English commerce and the poverty of Scots agriculture and about the merits of a commercial society as such. The neo-republican themes of the nexus between commerce, luxury and corruption on the one hand and that between landholding, concern for the common good and patriotism on the other found a ready reception among many Scots. Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun was one of the most prominent to argue against the Unionists' vision of a Scotland riding into the modern world of commerce on the back of English trade.

The debate about the Union, both before and after, went much further than economic matters. The consideration of various forms of union brought out the conventional character and changeability of constitutional arrangements. Attention was drawn to the question of the relationship between population and Parliamentary representa-

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tion. Scotland had been allocated 45 members of the House of Commons to be added to the 513 from England and Wales, and her nobility could elect 16 representatives to supplement the 220 southern peers who made up the House of Lords by right of birth. Alternatives such as a federal Europe were canvassed, and the problematic relationship between state apparatus and national community became apparent. Comparisons were invited between England's common law and Scotland's civil-law system (which remained after the Union). The relationship between church and state was put into sharp focus. After generations of conflict in England and a grudging, uncertain and limited toleration granted to dissenters from the Anglican church, the Union suddenly brought about a state with an episcopal state church south of the border and a Presbyterian one in the north.

Above all, the creation of the Union invigorated the debate, which began with the union of the English and Scottish crowns in 1603, about the relevance of the English political experience and of English political processes to Scottish life and, by doing so, it made Scotsmen reflect upon the nature of politics as such. Scotland had never had political groupings like the Whigs and Tories; her politics had largely been conducted along clannish lines of traditional allegiance to persons and families. Now, in greater numbers than ever before, her leading men were syphoned off to London as supporting cast in an alien and distant political play, leaving Scotland and her national capital with an empty political stage. The vacancy was filled to a remarkable extent by a kind of replacement politics that expressed itself in developing and supplementing older schemes for economic development and educational renewal, as well as in the life of the law and the politics of church government – for Scotland preserved her own legal system and her Kirk. It was, in short, the politics of culture. Forced by circumstances, Scotland thus delivered dramatic proof that issues such as these could make up a *public* life, could be dealt with in a public process not unlike the political process but with a measure of independence from politics in the narrower sense. In short, Scotland's position as a nationally coherent province on the political periphery, while common in early modern Europe, was assumed under circumstances that made her reflect publicly on the advent of the modern world and her place in it in a way that might otherwise have taken much longer and been even more difficult. This public reflection is now commonly referred to as the Scottish

Enlightenment, and Hume's writings on public issues are to be seen, at least in their inception, as a contribution to it.

Hume's politics

Such was, in brief compass, the political situation whose logic Hume intended to analyse and repair. All the issues catalogued above were discussed or, at least, referred to when Hume presented his politics to the world in the 1740s and 1750s. As indicated earlier, he dealt with politics in three different genres; as political philosophy, especially in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, and in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, but also in some of the *Essays*; as political observation in many of the *Essays*; and as political history in the *History of England*, but also in several of the *Essays*. The *Essays* thus function both as a political supplement to the *Treatise* and as an extension of the *History* from 1689 to 1740. Several of them may in fact have been intended for the volume on politics Hume mentions in the advertisement to the *Treatise* in 1739. Yet, when Hume published the first collection in 1741, he explained in the preface that these essays had been written for a projected journal. Hume's ideal was clearly the polite essay of Addison and Steele, but his overall project was equally clearly wider and more ambitious. He not only wanted to introduce into Scotland elegant conversation pieces on moral and, as we would say, cultural topics, he wanted to make politics itself a topic of such conversation. With the switch from an Edinburgh journal to a book form, this undoubtedly became an ambition not only for the Scottish, but for the greater British stage. This is to say that Hume wanted to show that political debate need not be the usual divisive, sectarian assertion of irreconcilable positions, but that it could indeed be the collective formulation of public opinion. Behind this project lay the idea that there is no such thing as a right political arrangement inherent in history, as in the ancient constitution of Whig lore, or in nature, as in natural-rights theories, or in the divine dispensation, as in divine-right monarchism. As long as such beliefs prevailed, political debate could be nothing but pointless assertion and counter-assertion. For Hume, political arrangements were not given; they were, in a complex sense, made by people acting on their beliefs. If people could be persuaded to reflect upon this, the political process, whether of conservation or reform, would become a matter of self-consciously forming opinions.

Hume approached his task in three ways; he showed by example how to make politics into polite conversation; he refuted the claims of the political sects or parties for an empirical, especially historical, foundation; and he provided a metaphysics of politics as convention. We will look at each in turn.

To political partisans, one of the most provocative aspects of Hume's political writings was his ability to find something to be said on both sides of most public questions, that is, to identify something to talk about. He juxtaposed opposing standpoints, often in semi-dialogue form, in order to make this explicit. Similarly he imitated ancient models of character drawing in order to convey the complexity of political personalities and thus get away from one-sided panegyric and denunciation. In the *Essays* the most striking example of this is the character of Sir Robert Walpole; and the *History* presents a large number of character sketches.

The basis for Hume's independence was his thorough analysis of British politics which, given the nature of that politics, had to involve a revaluation of English political history. All sides in the English political debate relied on a prescriptive use of history to justify their standpoints. Hume's critical intervention in the debate had three sides to it. He tried to show that the rival historical interpretations generally were wrong; and, second, that the associated understandings of contemporary politics were mistaken, with errors concerning the past reinforcing those concerning the present, and vice versa. Third, the implication of his critique is that the prescriptive use of history is quite misguided. These points are best appreciated by looking at Hume's own analysis of the political situation indicated in the first section above.

According to Hume, contemporary Britain was characterised by five striking features. First, it provided its citizens with an extraordinary degree of personal freedom which included religious liberty, safety of property and, at least in principle, guarantees against arbitrary taxation. Second, it secured this freedom through a mixed constitution in which the component powers were linked in a most peculiar way. Third, British politics was to a significant degree dominated by institutional arrangements rather than by individuals. Fourth, Britain, or at least England, was, along with the Netherlands, the first major country to base a large part of its wealth upon commerce, hitherto the preserve of – generally republican – city-states.

Fifth, in trying to keep its competitive edge in the increasingly commercial society of Europe, Britain was in effect engaged in empire-building based upon trade and only secondarily on conquest.

While many of Hume's contemporaries agreed that these were the characteristic features of modern Britain, Britons were, in his eyes, generally mistaken in their understanding of them. This applied in particular to the first three points.

Those who appreciated the freedom of the English constitution saw it as a genius that was inherent in that constitution but which, disastrously, had been trapped by despotic Stuart kings in the seventeenth century. The events in 1688-9 were thus truly a revolution that returned Englishmen to their ancient freedom. On such an interpretation the Revolution was seen either as a revival of the ancient constitution or as a new political contract in imitation of the original contract implied by earlier instruments of freedom, such as Magna Charta. In Hume's eyes all of this was simply Whig fantasy. For him Britain's system of freedom was brand new; it was a creation or, rather, an effect of the Revolution settlement. Rather than the certainty of antiquity, the system of liberty had all the uncertainty of novelty; and if things went wrong, it would be disastrously misguided to see the calamity as a corruption of tradition.

In order to underscore this thesis, Hume provided a grandiose interpretation of English history, of which we can indicate only one or two central features. He argued that there was no evidence for the much vaunted ancient free constitution. The revered charters of freedom were on the whole catalogues of special privileges forced upon despotically inclined monarchs by groups of power-hungry feudal lords. And despite such limitations, the concentration of power in the crown began early, grew steadily and had reached absolutist proportions of the common European kind well before the first Stuart king. Like his European peers, James I simply followed a pattern of absolutist kingship and his son, Charles I, tried to do likewise. They faced unusual opposition, however, and they proved to have very little talent for coping with this. Because of England's geographic position, there was no tradition for her monarchs to maintain a standing army; when the need for arms arose, special funds were granted the king by Parliament. While the king certainly was the richest person in the realm, he was far from rich enough to maintain an establishment, particularly a standing army, which would threaten the independence