

COMMERCE AND POLITICS IN HUME'S *HISTORY OF ENGLAND*

Jia Wei



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IN HUME'S
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Jia Wei

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For my parents, whose love and devotion are
much more than I can repay.

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This book is dedicated to my parents.

Abbreviations

<i>Essays</i>	<i>Hume: Political Essays</i> , ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge, 1994).
<i>Essays MPL</i>	<i>David Hume: Essays, Moral, Political and Literary</i> , ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1987).
<i>History</i>	David Hume, <i>The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688</i> (6 vols, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund edition, 1983).
<i>Letters</i>	<i>The Letters of David Hume</i> , ed. J. Y. T. Greig (2 vols, Oxford, 2011).
<i>Letters Eminent</i>	<i>Letters of Eminent Persons Addressed to David Hume</i> , ed. J. E. Burton (Edinburgh/London, 1849).
<i>New Letters</i>	<i>New Letters of David Hume</i> , ed. R. Klibansky and E. C. Mossner (Oxford, 1954).

The first two volumes of Hume's *The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688* are abbreviated as *Medieval History*, the third and fourth volumes as *Tudor History*, and the fifth and sixth volumes as *Stuart History*. The quotations follow the order of the Liberty Fund edition, citing the specific volume with the page number(s) (i.e., Hume, *History*, III, 80). For the relevant passages which are omitted from the Liberty Fund edition, this book uses the first printed edition.

Introduction

You know that there is no post of honour in the English Parnassus more vacant than that of History. Style, judgment, impartiality, care – everything is wanting to our historians; and even Rapin, during this latter period, is extremely deficient. I make my work very concise, after the manner of the Ancients. It divides into three very moderate volumes; one to end with the death of Charles the First; the second at the Revolution; the third at the Accession, for I dare come no nearer the present times.

Hume to John Clephane, January 1753

In August 1770, Hume wrote to his publisher William Strahan ‘I believe this is the historical Age and this the historical Nation.’¹ His own book *The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688* (1754–61) would become a best-seller and a historiographical model for other national histories of the eighteenth century.² He wrote it during a historically critical period – through most of the Seven Years’ War (1756–63), a time when Britain was struggling to build a trans-Atlantic empire.³ He was an astute observer of this ‘historical age’ in which Britain underwent momentous economic development and political transformation. He saw that English history was constructed on a foundation which his contemporaries too often misunderstood, and it needed to be told from a new, impartial perspective.

To fully explain the context in which Hume engaged with contemporary politics and strands of political thought would require a library. Yet the perceptive reader might with good reason be unwilling to delve into the political complexities of a distant age, and might rather ask the question: what did Hume say about those well-known events that have changed the course of English history and continue to influence the world today?

¹ J. Y. T. Greig, ed., *The Letters of David Hume* (2 vols, Oxford, 2011), II, 230.

² Karen O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 56–92.

³ John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State 1688–1783* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), pp. xiii–xxii.

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The standard reading of Hume's *History* remains the rich study published by Duncan Forbes in 1975.⁴ Forbes claimed that this work could be read as an alternative to 'orthodox Whig history' – 'an establishment history: the application of a theory of political obligation designed for a post-revolutionary establishment to the events of the seventeenth century'.⁵ But Forbes emphasised Hume's political context at the expense of his ambition as a historian, and assumed more knowledge of the intricacies of mid-eighteenth-century British politics than general readers are likely to possess.

Since the publication of Forbes's work, many scholars have contributed new information and valuable insights.⁶ Hugh Trevor-Roper, James Moore, Roger Emerson, Donald Livingston, Nicholas Phillipson, and recently Moritz Baumstark have emphasised the Scottish context in which Hume composed his history.⁷ Trevor-Roper argued that Hume's philosophical approach to history revealed the early eighteenth-century Scots' awareness of the necessity to transform the institutions and political structures of their feudal society, and to build in their place a new market mechanism through which property rights and commercial liberty could be protected.⁸ Phillipson has supplied an admirable brief reading of Hume's *History* with a particular focus on its connection to the Scottish intellectual milieu. Linking Hume to Daniel Defoe, Joseph Addison, and Richard Steele – the leading champions of the nascent coffeehouse culture at the turn of the eighteenth century – Phillipson has interpreted Hume's *History* as an attempt to undermine the zealotry and prejudice of contemporary political culture.

Despite all these efforts, there is still significant room to reveal Hume's unique contribution to eighteenth-century historiography. There is no doubt that Hume's Scottish background gives emotional breadth to his *History*, best exemplified by his sympathetic portrait of Mary Queen of Scots. His narrative

⁴ Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge, 1975).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

⁶ For instance, Victor G. Wexler, 'David Hume's Discovery of a New Science of Historical Thought', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 10 (1976–77), 185–203; Eugene F. Miller, 'Hume on Liberty in the Successive English Constitutions', *Liberty in Hume's History of England*, ed. N. Capaldi and D. Livingston (Dordrecht and Boston, 1990), pp. 53–103.

⁷ James Moore, 'Hume's Political Science and the Classical Republican Tradition', *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 10 (1977), 809–39; Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago, 1984); Nicholas Phillipson, *David Hume: The Philosopher as Historian* (London, 2011); Moritz Baumstark, 'David Hume: The Making of a Philosophical Historian. A Reconsideration' (unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2007); Roger L. Emerson, *Essays on David Hume, Medical Men and the Scottish Enlightenment: Industry, Knowledge and Humanity (Science, Technology and Culture, 1700–1945)* (Aldershot, 2009); H. Trevor-Roper, *History and the Enlightenment* (New and London, 2010), pp. 1–16, 20–8. For Hume's intellectual biography, see also Henry Grey Graham, *Scottish Men of Letters in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1908), pp. 35–59; Carey M. Roberts, 'David Hume', *Eighteenth-Century British Historians*, ed. E. J. Jenkins (Detroit and London, 2007), pp. 193–205.

⁸ Trevor-Roper, *History and the Enlightenment*, pp. 1–16, 20–8.

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also conforms to a cosmopolitan vision of modern Europe, which his Scottish friends supported unswervingly. Nevertheless, Hume's *History* did not make him the 'cultural spokesman' of the Scottish intellectuals.⁹ After all, it was England that exemplified the European approach to modern commercial society, and his homeland lagged far behind in carrying the same logic into its collective memory.

No less important was Hume's apparently distinctive approach to historiography, which set him apart from his Scottish friends who more or less believed in the stadial progress of society in macro-history. He understood that chance was too important a factor in history that the foundations of a macro-narrative should not be purely metaphysical. He elaborated on the unforeseen consequences of history and therefore in the concluding remarks of his medieval history: 'the balance of power [in the English constitution] has extremely shifted among the several orders of the state; and this fabric has experienced the same mutability, that has attended all human institutions'.¹⁰ He clearly had a sense of the interplay between historical trends and human volition in the formation of history that his Scottish contemporaries did not possess.

Among recent readings of Hume's *History*, much emphasis has been laid on the intellectual and political context in which Hume composed this work, but little has been said about the singular ways in which he narrated the process of modern England in the making and drew important lessons for his readers. This book is therefore intended to place Hume's *History* in a new light. It contends that some general perceptions of Hume as a historical and political thinker have been vague and inaccurate. A more systematic study is required to determine the relationship between the three Humes: Hume the political thinker, Hume the historian, and Hume the political economist.

More specifically, this book pays greater attention to broad social, economic, and institutional changes which Hume wove into an entirely innovative fabric of causation. This becomes evident by examining three aspects of Hume's *History*: first, his championship of modernity, which he integrated into a historical narrative of England's development as a trading nation; second, his emphasis on maritime trade, which took place against the backdrop of commercial revolution; and third, his endorsement of both liberty and authority.

Hume's immediate historiographical starting point is best represented by the following question: given the uniformity of human nature, how is one to conceptualise the unique way in which England formed its own identity? For him, the essence of man is embedded in a multitude of passions and desires which in turn determine the principles of government and the whole organisation of society.¹¹ Although he discarded the climatic factor in his formula

⁹ O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, p. 93.

¹⁰ Hume, *History*, II, 524.

¹¹ For two divergent views regarding how Hume employed his concept of human nature in his *History*, see David H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Towards a Logic of Historical*

of a national character, he went rather close to the historiography of Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu.¹² The impact of eighteenth-century French historiography on Hume's writing can be traced to his formative years in the Jesuit college at La Flèche.¹³ Like Voltaire, Edward Gibbon, and William Robertson, Hume learned from Montesquieu that the *esprit* of a nation could be defined by its approach to the operation of law, the form of government, and manners.¹⁴

In 1759, Hume suggested to William Robertson that he should write about modern lives in the Greek manner, which did not 'enter into a detail of the actions', but which marked the 'manners of the great personages, by domestic stories, by remarkable sayings, and by a general sketch of their lives and adventures'.¹⁵ This captured perfectly Hume's own approach to historical writing.¹⁶ As Gibbon observed, Hume's *History* was characterised by 'calm philosophy' and 'careless inimitable beauties', as distinct from 'the perfect

Thought (London, 1971), pp. 203–6, and Spencer K. Wertz, *Between Hume's Philosophy and History: Historical Theory and Practice* (Lanham, 2000), pp. 19–34. Against Fischer's view that Hume applied a universal concept of human nature to his historical narrative, Wertz has argued that 'Hume's view of human nature and its use in historical inquiry is more diversified and complex than the standard interpretation has made it out to be', p. 33.

¹² Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. A. M. Cohler, B. C. Miller and H. S. Stone (Cambridge, 1989). For Montesquieu's influence on Hume, see Roger B. Oake, 'Montesquieu and Hume', *Modern Language Quarterly* 2 (1941), 25–41; Trevor-Roper, *History and the Enlightenment*, pp. 4–6; J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* (5 vols, Cambridge, 2001–11), II, 258–61.

¹³ William Hunt, 'David Hume: Influences on his Historical Work', *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, ed. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller (18 vols, Cambridge, 1907–21 edn), X, 282.

¹⁴ Voltaire, *Essai sur l'Histoire Générale, et sur les Moeurs et l'Esprit des Nations, depuis Charlemagne jusqu'à nos jours* (Geneva, 1761–3); William Robertson, *The History of Scotland during the Reigns of Queen Mary and of King James VI till his Accession to the Crown of England* (2 vols, Dublin, 1778 edn), I, particularly 15–17. For a discussion of another source of influence on Hume in this type of thinking, see John P. Wright, 'Butler and Hume on Habit and Moral Character', *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, ed. M. A. Stewart and J. P. Wright (University Park, PA, 1995), pp. 105–18. For Hume's Scottish intellectual context, see Gladys Bryson, *Man and Society: The Scottish Inquiry of the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, 1945), pp. 78–113; Frank E. Manuel, 'Edward Gibbon: Historien-Philosophe', *Daedalus* 105 (1976), 231–45; Paul Cartledge, 'The Enlightened Historiography of Edward Gibbon, Esq.: A Bicentennial Celebration', *Maynooth Review* 3 (1977), 67–93; Emerson, *Medical Men*, pp. 119–20; Trevor-Roper, *History and the Enlightenment*, pp. 4–16; James Harris, *Hume's Intellectual Development: An Overview* (Edinburgh, 2011), pp. 19–23.

¹⁵ Hume's letter to William Robertson in 1759, *Letters*, I, 316. Giovanna Ceserani, 'Modern Histories of Ancient Greece: Genealogies, Contexts, and Eighteenth Century Narrative Historiography', *The Western Time of Ancient History: Historiographical Encounters with the Greek and Roman Pasts*, ed. A. Lianeri (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 138–55.

¹⁶ For an analysis of Hume's style of writing history, see Leo Braudy, *Narrative Form in History and Fiction* (Princeton, 1970), pp. 31–90. For Mr Macaulay's review of the tone of Hume's *History*, see John Hill Burton, *Life and Correspondence of David Hume* (2 vols, New York and London, 1983), I, 404–5.

composition, the nervous language, [and] the well-turned periods' of William Robertson.¹⁷ Notwithstanding their differences in focus, style, and interest, the eighteenth-century philosophical historians all believed that the *mœurs* and the *esprit* were the driving forces of history since it was through them that the human mind developed and bore ideas.¹⁸

Hume originally planned to produce a contemporary history of England from the Stuart age onwards, since he was 'frightened with the notion of continuing a narrative through a period of 1700 years'. Yet after publishing the two volumes of Stuart history in 1757, he took a different direction: by delving first into the Tudor period and then into medieval times. It is true that in his letter to the Countess de Boufflers in 1767 Hume was still playing with the idea of writing a post-Revolutionary history, but he never, as he had originally planned, completed this project.¹⁹ His complete narrative covers the period from Julius Caesar's conquest to the seventeenth-century constitutional struggle between Crown and Parliament and ends with the reconciliation of both causes in the Revolution of 1688.

Hume's contemporary Richard Hurd satirised this approach to historiography by commenting that 'for having undertaken to conjure up the spirit of absolute power, he [sc. Hume] judged it necessary to the charm, to reverse the order of things, and to evoke this frightful spectre by writing (as witches use to say their prayers) *backwards*'.²⁰ Indeed, the reverse order of Hume's historical investigation shifted the balance of interest further in the direction of the historical cause, rather than the consequences, of the mid-seventeenth-century constitutional crisis. Thus, the most important question which he answered in his *History* is how did England develop its unique

¹⁷ Quoted in James Westfall Thompson, *A History of Historical Writing: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (2 vols, New York, 1942 edn), II, 71, 80. For an overview of William Robertson's approach to history, see D. J. Womersley, 'The Historical Writings of William Robertson', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47 (1986), 497–506.

¹⁸ There is a huge literature on Hume's philosophical thinking on this aspect; see, for example, J. B. Black, *The Art of History: A Study of Four Great Historians of the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1965), pp. 1–28; Daniele Francesconi, 'William Robertson on Historical and Unintended Consequences', *Cromohs – Cyber Review of Modern Historiography* 4 (1999), 1–18; John P. Wright, 'Ideas of Habit and Custom in Early Modern Philosophy', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 42 (2011), 24–7.

¹⁹ Hume to the Countess de Boufflers on 27 November 1767, *Private Correspondence of David Hume with Several Distinguished Persons between the Years 1761 and 1776, etc.* (London, 1820), pp. 249–52. See also Hume's letter to Andrew Millar on 17 July 1767, *Letters*, II, 151. In the latter letter, which was dated several months earlier, Hume had already decided not to continue his *History*. The disparity between these two letters showed that he was in two minds about the idea.

²⁰ Quoted in Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1980), p. 302. Richard Hurd, *Moral and Political Dialogues: Being the Substance of Several Conversations between divers Eminent Persons of the Past and Present Age; Digested by the Parties Themselves, and Now first Published from the Original Mss with Critical and Explanatory Notes by the Editor* (London, 1759), p. 304.

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system of liberty? Or, in other words, what was the historical origin of the extensive freedoms – civil, religious, and economic – which the English were able to achieve?

From the perspective of the mid eighteenth century, the English were the only people in the world who could proudly call themselves ‘free’. And they owed such extensive political, economic, and social freedom to the ancient constitution, which had been designed by the Saxon fathers and passed through generations. By looking backwards, Hume turned his critical gaze towards the ambiguous nature of this ancient constitution, which he identified as the true origin of ‘faction’. He revealed its inconsistency and ambiguity, and the incompatibility between modern English liberty and the organising principles of ancient and medieval government.²¹

As a philosophical historian, Hume’s ambition was not simply to construct a grand narrative of how England formed its unique identity and perspectives over a millennium, but also to draw, with a sense of critical distance, lessons about how England should position itself and cope with contemporary challenges in several political spheres. In his narrative of England’s peculiar path towards commercial wealth and historical changes in the subsequent decades, he concentrated upon the country’s failure to develop balanced post-feudal institutions and the English people’s failure to fully understand the real historical reason behind this failure. His goal was therefore to project a political awareness as a corrective to the entrenched Whig habits of thought, which he considered not only outdated but also dangerous.²²

Hume saw that the insular mind of the English rendered the task of maintaining hard-won liberty in the fierce struggle for power in eighteenth-century Europe more difficult. He needed to convince his readers that it was not the ancient constitution of England but the European heritage that enabled England to carve an important trans-Atlantic position and achieve extensive liberty in a modern world. More particularly, England’s endorsement of naval enterprises and maritime trade from the fifteenth century onwards opened the way to a mercantile spirit of freedom, with an agrarian society being gradually transformed into a commercial one. This resulted in a shift of power from the landed elites to the middling rank (or ‘the people’), from the country to the city, and from the gradually impoverished Crown to the increasingly formidable Parliament.

This is an important thesis in Istvan Hont’s *Jealousy of Trade* (2012).²³ Although Hont focused more attention on Hume’s *Essays*, *Moral and Political*

²¹ In this regard, J. G. A. Pocock’s comprehensive study reveals Hume’s debts to the seventeenth-century historians of English feudal history, especially Henry Spelman, John Selden, and Robert Brady. See J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1987); Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, II, 163–257.

²² Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York and London, 1965).

²³ Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), pp. 325–53. See also Istvan Hont, ‘Commercial

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(1741–42) and *Political Discourses* (1752) than on the *History*, his research has yielded a framework within which Hume's views of the origin and nature of English liberty can be understood. This book pushes Hont's thinking further. It argues that if we are to properly understand Hume's views of the origin and nature of English liberty, we need to examine the ways in which he explained the changing contours of English society and government through the transformative role of maritime trade. For Hume, the rise of commerce was instrumental to the decline of feudalism and its ultimate displacement by the rule of law. The advent of a new commercial age increased demands for the legal protection of life and private property, replacing the continual warfare and intermittent anarchy of the feudal age with the order of regular government.²⁴ This explained why English liberty owed its very existence to European naval discoveries and its subsequent endorsement of maritime trade.

This book combines a thematic with a chronological approach to Hume's political thought. It starts with Hume's account of medieval history and then proceeds to his account of the Tudors and Stuarts, even though he wrote them in the reverse order. This approach is different to that adopted by other Hume scholars such as Forbes, Pocock, and Phillipson. It demonstrates that Hume's emphasis on the importance of commerce in the establishment of English mixed government is best illuminated by the successive phases of the English constitution. This thematic approach is supplemented by a study of Hume's intellectual development over time. Each chapter traces his writings on various aspects of the economy and European politics from the 1740s onwards, including his emendations to the *History* after its publication.

Hume's goal, it will be shown, was to neutralise the party prejudices of his age and to articulate a philosophy of history which would encompass the past, the present, and the future. By examining the fundamental role of commerce in Hume's account of the evolution of English government, this book enhances our understanding of his view of the complex interplay between economy and politics. Hume's *History* underlined the primacy of maritime trade in the development of the English constitution. More emphasis is placed here on his history of the Stuart age, since this was the period that he singled out for its innovative development of maritime trade. The wider aim of this book is to show how Hume endeavoured to defend and justify his idea of the nature and origin of English liberty. It situates this idea within contemporary debates about the extent of governmental authority and the limits of parliamentary liberty. Moreover, it explores the overlapping relationship between Hume's view of the nature and origins of English mixed government and his attitudes towards contemporary politics.

Society and Political Theory in the Eighteenth Century: The Problem of Authority in David Hume and Adam Smith', *Main Trends in Cultural History: Ten Essays*, ed. W. Melching and W. Velema (Amsterdam, 1994), pp. 54–94.

²⁴ Hume, *History*, V, 557.

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This book is divided into two parts. The first part, including chapters 1 and 2, is concerned with Hume's account of the fundamental rationale of maritime trade, as well as England's singular path to liberty in the modern era. A sustained intention throughout is to highlight the connection he makes between trade and liberty. Part II (chapters 3, 4, and 5) explores Hume's views concerning the profound implications of maritime trade for English politics. The analysis of the first part of this book recovers the perspectives from which Hume differentiated good and bad policies. The second part illuminates Hume's vision of how trading interests were inextricably linked to a wide range of fundamental political issues.

Part I examines Hume's argument that commerce had fundamentally transformed English society and consequently the nature of its government. It is important that we account for the historical provenance of this idea. Debates on government policies in the mid eighteenth century were closely linked to questions of where English liberty came from; what it rested on; and whether its foundations were secure. Although Hume's political thinking is usually placed within the Scottish Enlightenment, his unique role in the philosophy of history has not been given enough scholarly attention. Unlike the work of many of his intellectual associates in Scotland, Hume's *History* did not rest on an enthusiasm for progress or an obsession with a theoretical model of history. Believing that real human history was full of uncertainties and unexpected challenges, he maintained that it would be an intellectual fallacy to construct a history of civilisation out of a theory of societal progress.

Underlying Hume's notion of a modern commercial society was an understanding of the logic of trade common among some Enlightenment thinkers, which he contrasted with feudal bondage and tyranny. For him, the strengthening ambition to pursue material gain, as well as the freedom to perform social and political actions, epitomised the commercial society.²⁵ More importantly, he observed that perceptions of early modern capitalism were accompanied by a new 'spirit of liberty' which prepared the way for far-reaching political changes. Hume's interpretation of the seventeenth-century constitutional crisis amounted to a radical denunciation of the party ideologies prevalent in his time. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that his historical account of the evolution of English government is much more radical than any of the Whig or Tory histories of his time.

Hume understood that the formation of the English state was owed largely to a particular approach to colonial trade, which was essentially a modern phenomenon that had nothing in common with the Saxon political

²⁵ Much has been written on Hume's science of human nature, particularly regarding his discussion of the 'self' and the mind; see, for instance, John P. Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Manchester, 1983), pp. 187–233; Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1991), pp. 129–51; Ian Ross, 'Philosophy and Fiction: The Challenge of David Hume', *Hume and the Enlightenment: Essays Presented to Ernest Campbell Mossner*, ed. W. B. Todd (Bristol, 1990), pp. 60–71.

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architecture. English government had been fundamentally transformed by the increasing momentum of commerce, with the replacement of feudal duties by the increasing equality of social, economic, and political interactions. The political struggle over the nature of the English constitution in the seventeenth century stemmed from the tension between the rising middling rank and the old landed elite. The former were motivated by the new 'spirit of liberty', while the latter hoped to maintain their authority.

The distinctive feature of Hume's political economy lies in his investigation into the theoretical solutions to the problem of balancing these two opposite interests. For him, this was not merely a matter of the inherent reciprocity between landed and commercial interests in the national economy. Rather, it entailed a profound reconsideration of the foundation of a political state. Therefore, the essence of Hume's *History* lies in his attempt to reinstate governmental authority as the guardian of political and economic liberty. This was the most important thesis in his account of the Tudor government. He shifted the seventeenth-century question of how sovereignty could be justified (either by divine providence or by the united will of individual subjects) to the question which fundamentally influenced eighteenth-century political thinking: given the de facto unifying powers of the sovereign, how may one define the long-term interests of a particular society and how are the rules and policies of a sovereign useful and beneficial to this society? This central question of Hume's science of politics has not yet been satisfactorily investigated.

Part II explores Hume's analysis of foreign, financial, and domestic policies by connecting his views on contemporary politics to his account of the seventeenth-century constitutional crisis in the *Stuart History*. It suggests that, as a historian, Hume was very much concerned with the long-term preservation of English liberty. His analysis of the constitutional crisis was in many ways linked to his understanding of eighteenth-century politics. He saw that the balance of English government was so delicate that it required a single unified decision-making power in order to survive in the European contest for power. He pointed out that the most serious obstacle to strengthening the sovereign power in his own time was the deficit economy, which had persisted in England for almost a century. Moreover, Hume explained the causes of the constitutional struggle by the difficulties of the Stuarts in maintaining state finance, which was not a new problem but one that had started in the Tudor era. In his view, tax administration was not simply a technical question, since it gradually became the decisive issue on which the interests of Crown and Parliament diverged.

One of Hume's objectives in his *History* was to emphasise the need to accommodate authority and liberty because both were intrinsically linked to England's role as a maritime trading power. He warned that it was extremely risky for the government to fail in domestic and foreign policy, since mistakes of this kind would pose a very real threat to the viability of England's commercial power and hard-won liberty. This book shows that Hume's emphasis in

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the *History* was not only European, as most Hume scholars have believed, but also, and crucially, trans-Atlantic. His views of the trans-Atlantic world were centred upon England's colonial trade in America and the West Indies, which, for him, had tied England's fortunes to uncertain imperial politics. This had important implications not only for the English constitution and England's role within the European state system, but also for the relationship between Britain and its American colonies and the resulting contest of European powers around the world.

A guiding theme in Hume's analysis of the seventeenth-century constitutional crisis is the divergent paths of civil and public liberty from the seventeenth century onwards. He elaborated the process through which the Commons used law as an instrument to encroach upon royal power, thereby securing the civil liberties of the people. However, this process jeopardised increasingly public liberty, which depended ultimately on a stable political order as well as regular and precise boundaries between Crown and Parliament. Hume gave a much more profound significance to the necessity of curbing the zeal of liberty. He saw that such zeal had reawakened the perennial conflict between Court and Country. It gave rise to a whole range of political problems that persisted even into his own time.