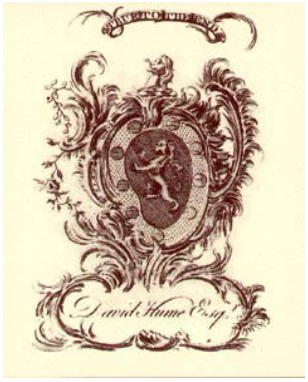

Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner, eds. ***Political Discourse in EarZy Modern Britain, 'Ideas in Context'***

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Book Reviews

NICHOLAS PHILLIPSON and QUENTIN SKINNER, eds. *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain,* 'Ideas in Context'. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. xiv + 444 pages. ISBN 0 521 39242 X. NP.

This volume pays tribute to the work of J.G.A. Pocock. Sixteen essays analyse and develop theses in Pocock's large *oeuvre,* and in a final essay Pocock himself, with characteristic vigour, imagination, and generosity, reflects on the issues raised by each contributor and points to new avenues of inquiry. There is also a useful bibliography of Pocock's publications from 1951 to 1992.

The editors obviously felt that Pocock's work is so wide-ranging that they could select only part of it for discussion. Although the temporal limits of the collection are marked by two Scotsmen, George Buchanan and David Hume, the work is English in its focus. There are no essays on Pocock's work on Renaissance political thought or on America, which means that his *magnum opus, The Machiavellian Moment,* is somewhat peripheral to most of these essays. With the exception of J. H. Burns' paper on Buchanan and the three papers on Hume, there is little concentrated discussion of Pocock's central thoughts on Scotland/England/Ireland/Britain. Consequently, it may be difficult for some readers to get a sense of the proper British-European-Atlantic contexts in which Pocock sets his distinctive and highly original theses about the English *Sonderweg.* These contexts could also have been drawn in if the volume had included discussion of Pocock's work on Burke and Gibbon from the last decade or so. While one fully sympathizes with the need to be selective in a volume such as this, it might have been useful to many readers if in an

introduction the editors had explained the isolation of English political thought from the connections and contrasts which Pocock has striven to establish.

The essays are all of high quality, including the three devoted to Hume, which are the only ones we can take account of here. In his fine essay "Hume and the American Revolution: The Dying Thoughts of a North Briton,"[1] Pocock suggested that there were three sources of Hume's pessimism in later life concerning the chances that the new and unique political system created in Britain since 1688 could survive: the growth of political populism, factionalism, and fanaticism; the vast expansion of empire; and the spiralling national debt. The three Hume essays in the present work may be said to explore these three themes. These are matters with which, says Pocock, scholars "trained at the points where law and philosophy meet, are still finding it hard to deal"(421). I shall try to overcome my handicap in this regard.

Nicholas Phillipson, in "Propriety, Property and Prudence: David Hume and the Defence of the Revolution," expands interestingly upon a central thesis of his book on Hume as an historian,[2] namely that Hume was deeply concerned to take factionalism and fanaticism out of politics and to make it a subject of polite conversation and, further, that in order to accomplish this he had to show that the account of the genesis of the contemporary political system, from which so many of the divisions derived, could be given from an impartial point of view. Hence the centrality of the *History* to Hume's political theory. Phillipson is now undergirding this argument by trying to show how Hume philosophically prepares the way for the role of polite, conversationally formed ideas of politics. In the *Treatise* it is the interest in property that forces people to learn mutual *proprieties*, while in the second *Inquiry* this potentially misleading Mandevillian language of interests is replaced by Ciceronian utility and associated prudence, which can be informed by the conversation of worldly philosophers. This is very interesting, but the question arises whether we can simply assume that the utility and prudence in question were of specifically *Stoic* provenance? Not least, if Phillipson is talking of a development in Hume, we shall look forward to much more detailed analyses of what looks like interested language in the post-*Inquiry* works and like prudential language pre-*Inquiry*.

In a very fine essay, "The Rhapsody of Public Debt: David Hume and the Voluntary State Bankruptcy," Istvan Hont offers a challenge to Pocock's thesis that Hume's political pessimism in the 1760s and 70s mainly was due to his idea that commercial societies harboured a self-destructive tendency to generate debt. Through a close analysis of Hume's essay "Of Public Debt," Hont poses the thesis that "it is not commerce, but war (or the threat of war) that produces national debt, and that Hume's essay is in fact a meditation on the links between the fiscal necessities of national security and the social dislocations produced by debt finance" (322). In other words, Hont suggests

that it is not, for Hume, commerce *per se* that creates debt; it is the wars which—mistakenly, in Hume's eyes—were assumed to be necessary to secure trade that lead to national indebtedness. Pocock readily concedes that war is "debt's principal cause" but adds that, even in a free-trade utopia without war, Hume would expect there to be growing international debt that would undermine civility which in turn would pave the way for political fanaticism (425).

In another excellent paper, "Universal Monarchy and the Liberties of Europe: David Hume's Critique of an English Whig Doctrine," John Robertson provides perspicuous contextual interpretation of a central theme in Hume. While not prepared to go as far as Montesquieu and maintain that there was no longer any danger of a French attempt at "universal monarchy" in Europe, Hume firmly rejected the French bogey-man of Whig war propaganda. The latter was in fact, according to Hume, a piece of political fanaticism that led Britain herself to continental and imperial expansionism. In sharp contrast to both Charles Davenant and Montesquieu, Hume did not see commercial empire as either necessary or beneficent. It would itself become territorial and thus just "another system of oppression and dependence, another obstruction to the progress of all nations" (371), as evidenced by Britain's treatment of the American colonies. It is hard to disagree with either the Humean thesis or Robertson's explanation of it.

Altogether the three Hume papers form a fitting finale to a splendid collection.

NOTES

1 First in *McGill Hume Studies*, edited by David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi and Wade Robison (San Diego: Autin Hill, 1979), 325–343; reprinted in Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History. Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 125–141, here at pp. 137–138.

2 Phillipson, Nicolas, *Hume* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989).

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