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Hume Studies Volume XXI, Number 2 (November, 1995) 189-192.

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DOUGLAS LONG

One's interpretation of the main thrust of John B. Stewart's admirable work *Opinion and Reform in Hume's Political Philosophy* seems to me to depend upon one's understanding (and of course Hume's understanding) of the three key terms in Stewart's title. To wit:

Opinion

For Hume, Stewart argues, opinion is the expression of belief, and belief is the foundation of moral and political motivation and commitment. Conservatives, not liberals—and not Hume—reduce opinion and belief to expressions of mere custom, habit and prejudice. Hume is committed to the use of reason to improve the quality (which is to say, roughly, the appropriateness and utility) of opinion and belief. Reasoned opinion and belief are in turn essential to that sociable refinement of the “interested affection” which is a prerequisite of fidelity, property, justice and government, which last is of course famously said by Hume to be *founded* on opinion.

Reform

Stewart sees Hume's scepticism, his moderation, his stinging critiques of abstraction and dogmatism, and his enthusiasm (after the fashion of Montesquieu) for “le doux commerce” as systematic underpinnings for a

program of dynamic reform: reform of opinion and belief, reform of systematic or scientific thinking about society, and wide-ranging reform of political practices and policies. The Burkian maxim that a state without the means of its modification is without the means of its improvement is not enough for Stewart's "Hume: the Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," far from being a mere "jeu d'esprit," sets forth an ideal meant to be seriously perused. Progressive change of a "Fabian"¹ nature—an adjective which I found a little worrisome—is not too much for Stewart's reforming Hume to contemplate.

There is much in Stewart's reconstruction of Hume's views on economics, society and the rule of law that is consonant with the appreciation of Hume's legal and political ideas expressed by F. A. Hayek,² though Hayek's name does not appear in Stewart's index. Comparison of the form(s) of liberalism attributed to Hume by Hayek and Stewart reveals, I think, a certain ambivalence in Stewart's attitude to reform and perhaps even in his interpretation of Hume's attitude to it. For "reform" can be an ambiguous term. In the spirit of what we might call, vulgarizing Duncan Forbes in the process, "scientific" liberalism, "reform" is essentially, though never dogmatically, programmatic. Alternatively, the spirit of a more "sceptical" liberalism is captured in "reform" as re-thinking, as reconstitution, with implications not of programmatic transformation but instead of moral and political restraint and caution. Stewart is not unaware of these tensions within the concept of reform, but I sense in his work an implicit partiality to programmatic reform which makes it difficult for him to resist injecting more of the enthusiast than of the sceptic into his construction of Hume's liberalism. Hayek's Hume differs from Stewart's in this respect. Hayek's Hume possesses few if any transformative ambitions, where Stewart's participates, albeit pragmatically, in a movement which Stewart sees as spanning many generations and working transformative wonders. The tension between Hayekian and Fabian interpretations of reform continually percolates under the surface of Stewart's argument and is never resolved.

Stewart has done a great service to a potentially broad and varied audience by insisting quite rightly on the subtlety and complexity of Hume's attitude to reform. Some of the most novel, enjoyable and persuasive sections of the book deal with such matters. But in the end Hume continues, to my great pleasure, to defy conclusive ideological characterization. The commitment of the sceptic to the experimental method is not the commitment of an ideologue to a reforming process.

Philosophy

Although many of the interesting and substantial footnotes in Stewart's book address the question of whether Hume was/is a conservative or a liberal, even those passages dealing with David Miller's work on Hume,³ predicated

as that work is on the distinction between philosophy and ideology, do not so far as I can recall explicate the thesis implicit in Stewart's title: that liberalism is David Hume's political philosophy—indeed, that whatever conservatives may be (and one senses that in the author's eyes it does not amount to much), liberalism is the political philosophy introduced by Hume to his century and bequeathed by him to us. Hayek, and also his predecessor Sir Karl Popper, would agree with this contention. Popper's philosophical postulation⁴ of the process, based on experience and observation, of recurrent falsification of scientific hypotheses as the basis of modernity's progressive development, and Hayek's praise for Hume's prescient understanding of such features of modern liberalism as the rule of law, the centrality and power of market relations and even, in Hayek's memorable and disturbing phrase, "the Atavism of Social Justice"⁵—all of these intellectual insights and the pattern of innovation (pace "Of the Original Contract") connected with them, if rightly attributed to Hume, would make him clearly the seminal philosopher of liberalism, at least in its current powerful incarnation.

In my view, then, the implicit thesis of *Opinion and Reform in Hume's Political Philosophy* is bold, sweeping, and aggressive to such a degree as to be notably "un-Humean," for it tends to represent Hume as something which Hume considered a contradiction in terms—a philosopher who has embraced, if not precisely a party, then at least a programme or a movement for change.⁶ The validity of this thesis depends on the acceptability to the reader of three interpretative strategies adopted by the author:

- (1) a strategic narrowing of the conception of "conservatism" and its relegation to the reactionary end of the spectrum of modes of political thinking;
- (2) a strategic reading of Hume's scepticism and of his experimental method such as to render them compatible with a fairly visionary and programmatic approach to political innovation and change;
- (3) a strategic conceptualization of "liberalism" as being, not an ideology (for an ideology is surely just the sort of thing that the Hume who so adroitly skewered the political programs of High Tories, Religious Whigs, contractarians and even the "positive and dogmatical" politics of Thomas Hobbes⁷ would have delighted in blowing to smithereens), but a philosophy—indeed the only philosophy of politics compatible with Hume's mode of thinking and writing.

In his treatment of Hume's context, of a selection of the works of his predecessors, and of a wide variety of his texts, John B. Stewart has shown himself once again⁸ to be a serious, penetrating and appreciative Hume scholar. His book offers a great deal to the reader who wishes to experience the

rich diversity of Hume's interests and the power, subtlety and excitement of his arguments. Stewart's line of interpretation derives its unity and its momentum, its cumulative quality, from the author's clear conviction that Hume founded (whether intentionally or not) a philosophy of liberalism which has survived roughly intact from his day to ours. But surely one can readily identify one major development in the western world of political thought and practice which is symptomatic of a major discontinuity between the thought of Hume and the brand of liberalism to which Senator Stewart is admirably committed. That development is the rise of political democracy. If we were to grant, for the sake of the present argument, that Hume might properly be represented as a liberal political philosopher, would we want to go further and grant that he can plausibly be construed as a liberal Democrat? I suspect that John B. Stewart would want to make such a case,⁹ but I would feel compelled to disagree with any such extension of his thesis about Hume's political philosophy and its implications for policy and practice.

NOTES

1 John B. Stewart, *Opinion and Reform in Hume's Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 213. Cited hereafter as "Stewart."

2 F. A. Hayek, "The Legal and Political Philosophy of David Hume," in *Hume: a Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by V. C. Chappell (London: Macmillan, 1968), 335-360.

3 David Miller, *Philosophy and Ideology in Hume's Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

4 Sir Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1959); for perspectives consonant with Hume's views, see Part I, Chapters I & IV, on "Falsifiability," and Chapter VIII, on "Probability."

5 Chapter Five of F. A. Hayek's *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 57-68 bears this title.

6 "...Philosophers, who have embraced a party (if that be not a contradiction in terms) ..." David Hume, "Of the Original Contract," *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, edited by Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 469.

7 David Hume, *The History of England* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983) Volume VI, Chapter LXII, 153.

8 His first work on Hume was John B. Stewart, *The Moral and Political Thought of David Hume* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

9 I have in mind Stewart's assertion that "[i]n essence, [Hume's?] individualism is egalitarian" (Stewart, 175), parentheses added.