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# “Politics May Be Reduced To a Science”? Between Politics and Economics in Hume’s Concepts of Convention<sup>1</sup>

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Many Hume scholars have partially anticipated the essential links between his magnum opus—the *History of England*—and other writings, but we lacked an appropriate theoretical framework. According to Andrew Sabl,<sup>2</sup> the key to the breakthrough is provided by “coordination theory.” The approach to Hume’s work through the lens of twentieth-century political theories has been preceded, to take one example, by Russell Hardin, who envisions Hume’s notion of convention as a prototype of game theory. Hardin also mentions coordination theory in relation to game theory,<sup>3</sup> but it is Sabl who elucidates its comprehensiveness and significance, and successfully grasps the essential features of Hume as a political theorist. The most interesting aspect of Sabl’s *Hume’s Politics* is that he does so not through *A Treatise of Human Nature*, the *Essays, Moral and Political*, or the *Political Discourses*, but mainly through the *History of England*.

Sabl’s approach is analytical as well as constructive, which is basically different from my own historiographical, or what Sabl calls “humanistic” (18), method. This partly accounts for the author’s attention to Hume’s political *theory* rather than his political *philosophy*, a distinction of which the author is conscious. According to the author, some previous studies of Hume in the field of political philosophy have been “badly posed” (8, 17). In contrast, the focus here on Hume’s political *theory* serves to elucidate Hume’s excellence in delineating the mechanisms of various types of conventions, without naively extracting conclusions about Hume’s

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conservative leanings from it. The pioneering approach that Sabl takes to Hume as a political theorist can also be helpful for understanding why previous evaluations of Hume's political philosophy have been so divided among Hume scholars, as well as among his contemporaries.

One of the biggest merits of *Hume's Politics* lies in the author's analytical sorting of Hume's rich but often opaque ideas. To take some examples, the distinctions Sabl makes—between “ordinary,” “fundamental,” “pseudo-,” or “negative” conventions (34–35, 44–45);<sup>4</sup> between “science (1)” (a science of broad, society-wide social and political forces) and “science (2)” (a microscience of explaining individual human actions and choices) (12–16); and between vertical and horizontal inequality (188–90)—are all useful clarifications. I have insufficient space here to examine all of them, but these theoretical distinctions (or reconstructions) are very effective for deepening our understanding of Hume as a political theorist. Furthermore, Hume's reticence about employing the phrase “natural rights” in his political vocabulary has long served to disconnect him from other political philosophers. However, Sabl's focus on the reciprocal relationship between authority and allegiance (chapters 3 and 4) enables us to examine his politics in a new light, theoretically as well as historically.

Not despite, but rather because of these significant merits, there are some points that I would like to raise with Sabl that I hope would serve to clarify his argument further: 1) the nature of what the author calls Humean liberalism; 2) the distinction between the theory of spontaneous order and the coordination theory; 3) the distinction between fundamental conventions and pseudo-conventions; and 4) the issue of public credit. Let me address these issues one by one.

### 1. Humean Liberalism: Conscious or Unconscious?

Notwithstanding some reservations, Sabl generally admits that, for Hume, the fundamental convention of authority is a product of “unintended” or “unconscious” consequences: “Humean liberalism *need* not be conscious. It does not matter whether we affirm it as long as we live by the conventions it describes and (via moments of *conscious* statesmanship) aim to bring about” (89, emphases added).<sup>5</sup> His wording “need not be conscious” should be heeded here: he does not say “need be unconscious.” Elsewhere, he uses phrases like “Hume's account of micromotives, their contexts, and their collective (*often unintended*) effects” (16, emphases added). These seem to indicate that these coordinating processes are mostly unconscious, at the same time partly conscious.<sup>6</sup> Then, who should be conscious of this process? The author apparently claims that (wise) legislators or statesmen should have an unusually acute interest in such subtle effects, while the vulgar do not necessarily become conscious of even the existing conventions of authority.

Then, how can we realize the value and significance of Humean liberalism, while remaining unconscious of these coordinating processes? It is true that Humean liberalism enables us to “justify a set of evaluative standards for political life without making any reference to the concepts normally regarded as necessary for doing so: autonomy, justifications that no one could reasonably reject, dignity, hypothetical consent, social and distributive justice” (229). However, to dispense with such philosophical presumptions is not the same as to allow us to be generally unconscious of the coordinating processes. In the same vein, although the author emphasizes the merit of “enlarged interests” rather than “extensive sympathy” (49–55), to achieve the former seems to require much more reflection than to obtain the latter. If Sabl claims that Hume intended not only statesmen but also general readers to find such an enlarged interest by reading the *History* through a kind of meta-recognition, I completely agree with the author. In other words, if one of Hume’s (and Sabl’s) intentions is to reveal what people believe to be sacrosanct and unquestionable as merely conventions (some of which are fundamental, while others are pseudo-conventions), it seems necessary for us to reach a level of recognition that is the same as, or at least close to, Hume’s about the world of politics. In that case, it might become redundant and unnecessary to emphasize the “unconscious” aspect of Humean liberalism and the distinction between statesmen and common people, especially in democratic countries of the twenty-first century.

## **2. The Difference between the Theory of Spontaneous Order and Coordination Theory**

Secondly, and related to the first point, the distinction Sabl makes between coordination theory and the theory of spontaneous order does not seem completely convincing. Sabl mentions the name of Hayek and the term “spontaneous order” only once (93) throughout the main text of this book (although Hayek’s name occurs several times in footnotes [258n40; 272n5]).

Sabl seems to resort to the awareness, or consciousness, of coordinating processes when he mentions conventions of authority as something distinct from economic activities. When it comes to the latter, he argues that “[e]volutions alone, unless backed by purposive reinforcement, can work in economics and natural selection, but not in politics, because there the rewards that powerful agents can gain by *purposefully* blowing up a convention are too great and too obvious” (30, emphases added). Presumably based on these distinctions, Sabl criticizes Hayek’s claim: “Any modern and prosperous order of property relations is not, pace Hayek, a spontaneous one” (93). I essentially agree with Sabl’s claim that no reading of Hume based on the theory of spontaneous order “counts as ‘conservative’ in any usual sense or necessarily entails politically conservative conclusions” (258n40)

and that “constitutional conservatism is fully consistent with social liberalism or radicalism” (236).

Nevertheless, to draw boundaries between political and economic realms is not so simple. Even in “spontaneous” economic activities—although many of them certainly “are accidental in origin” (32)—once a market fully establishes itself, the government has to consciously supervise (if not intervene in) economic activities through legal sanctions in order to maintain sound competition; this is what Hayek is willing to admit. The point is whether or not we can clearly distinguish between politics and economics to the extent that the author argues: “Politics and government . . . represent a special case” (7). If fundamental changes in political systems are concerned with “dynamic” coordination, some fundamental changes in economic systems can be so, as well.

Blurring the boundaries between coordination theory and the theory of spontaneous order seems to raise another question. Although I agree with the author’s claim that Hume’s *History* could be regarded as one of the best and most pioneering examples of coordination theory, it seems possible to find similar examples among other Scots’ works. On this point, Sabl again appeals to the distinction between economics and politics (or the distinction between static and dynamic conventions [7, 8]), especially in contrast with Adam Smith: “[Russell] Hardin says the Humean liberal will follow Adam Smith’s *maxim pas trop gouverner* (do not govern too much). In the case of commerce, Hardin’s context, that may be largely true of Hume’s thought. In the wider scheme of things, it is incomplete” (89). It is important to remind oneself here that the scope of Hayek’s notion of spontaneous order is not limited to economic activities; he also includes legal and political systems. In fact, other Scottish Enlightenment thinkers are sometimes referring to non-economic activities when they appeal to what Hayek considers to be the theory of spontaneous order. In the *Essays on the History of Civil Society*, for example, Adam Ferguson, an author whom Hayek frequently cites, opines, “nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design.”<sup>7</sup> Here, Ferguson is referring to political subordination in general, not allegiances to any particular monarch or particular political system. If these examples can also be interpreted as an illustration of a “wider scheme of things” than commerce, that is, dynamic coordination, further elaboration might be necessary to figure out the originality of Hume as a pioneer of the coordination theory.

### 3. The Distinction between Fundamental Conventions and Pseudo-Conventions

My third question is concerned with the distinction between fundamental conventions and pseudo-conventions. The problem is: who can differentiate them, how,

and with what authority? If we confine our discussion to Hume's text, matters are simple: pseudo-conventions are what he deems them to be. If, however, Sabl's interest lies in the applicability of Humean politics to contemporary issues, this seems more complicated than it looked at first sight.

I know that the author clearly admits that this aspect is "what the account [of this book] leaves out on the empirical side" (228), but this is the point at which we have to go beyond a purely analytical reading of Hume's political writings. In my view, the analytical and theoretical distinction between two types of conventions should be checked by an important characteristic of Humean political *philosophy*—skepticism—although Sabl flatly denies the efficacy of this label as "completely misleading" (4). On this point, Sabl's interpretation of Hume seems rather more optimistic than Hume's own work suggests.<sup>8</sup> Sabl emphasizes Hume's belief in the "timeless truths of politics" with good reason, but Hume often adds a skeptical tone to such self-confident statements. Although Hume often, and seemingly naively, appeals to the distinctions between true and false religions or philosophies, he also well knows how difficult it is to draw a clear line between them. This is because, in the real world, such distinctions are highly dependent on their social and cultural contexts. In this sense, despite the theoretical efficacy of such distinctions, Hume also seems to teach us that we should avoid the dogmatic claim that we are able to distinguish between fundamental and pseudo-conventions. If Hume required his readers to adopt such a detached and cool position, it must be worthwhile to emphasize that Hume does expect us to have a modicum of what he himself calls skepticism.

The author's seemingly "optimistic" reading of Hume might partly stem from his focus on the *History of England* (especially the first volumes). Certainly, Hume traces how we establish new fundamental conventions from political confusions throughout the *History* and especially in the first two volumes. On the other hand, however, Hume seems to be more interested in depicting how fragile and precarious these conventions are, or how often we are subject to political "crisis"—which is a word included in the subtitle of Sabl's book. The first volumes of the *History* provide us with an account of humanity's first steps from barbarism to civilization, but we should also be reminded that Hume also inserted a short digression on the cyclical view of civilization early on in the *History*.<sup>9</sup> He also repeatedly expresses his worries about the return to barbarism in his later letters.<sup>10</sup> Although it appeared unlikely to most of his contemporaries (including him) that civilization could fall back to a *primitive* stage, Hume seemed genuinely to consider it not implausible that his society would lapse into a *barbaric* state. Although I have no intention of undervaluing recent developments in political theory, which have arguably "rendered Hume obsolete" (12), another suggestion of Hume's is still worth listening to: "the world is still too young to fix many general truths in politics, which will remain true to the latest posterity."<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. Issue of Public Credit as an Example of Wrong Unintended Consequences

Lastly, but related to the above points, what seems to be missing from Sabl's analysis is the issue of public credit—one of the topics on which Hume's argument sounds most pessimistic, despite his generally favorable evaluation of the modern world. Sabl mentions this essay several times, but only in passing (79, 107, 253n41, and 273n6). This is partly because Sabl's focus is more on the *History of England* than on the *Political Discourses*, and partly because his main interest is in the issue of political authority rather than in economic, including financial, activities. Nevertheless, Hume actually traces the origin and development of this financial custom as a part of political administration and expresses his pertinacious worries about this issue more than once in the *History*. Originally, the public credit started as personal and coercive loans made by monarchs since the reign of Henry III. Hume observed that these "pretended" loans were often nothing but general tax and their repayments were neither regular nor punctual. Hume makes a point of remarking that "I reckon [Henry III's exaction of loans from the citizens of London] not among the violations of the Great Charter" and that these measures, "without producing any discontent, were uniformly continued by all his successors, till the last century" (Hume, H 2:21). Hume is always apprehensive about the illegitimacy and arbitrariness of this custom because "[t]his pretended loan, as being more regular, was really more dangerous to the liberties of the people" (H 3:147–48).<sup>12</sup> However, it did not remain merely monarchs' personal and arbitrary borrowings. As early as the very reign of Henry III, Hume observed that the public debt was "contracted upon parliamentary security" for the first time. The following remark reflects Hume's concerns about this issue in his essay, "Of Public Credit," exactly because it seems to go through a certain level of, if not completely, legitimate procedures: "The commencement of this pernicious practice deserves to be noted; a practice, the more likely to become pernicious, the more a nation advances in opulence and credit. The ruinous effects of it are now become apparent, and threaten the very existence of the nation" (H 2:454). These comments made by Hume in the *History* might have merited more attention from the author, because, according to Hume, this financial system should be deemed a fundamentally constitutional rather than economic issue, and it could have seriously injured (or, at worst, led to the collapse of) the constitutional authority itself.

This is also interesting because the public credit can be explained as an example of the wrong type of unintended consequence: nobody anticipated the disastrous consequences of this habit begun by European monarchs. More importantly, even after experiencing the default of public credit during the eighteenth-century crises, people soon re-involved themselves in the same financial system. Mentioning the immediate recurrence of governmental borrowings from bankers in spite of "the

violent breach of faith” in 1672, Hume laments in the very *History* that “public credit, instead of being of so delicate a nature, as we are apt to imagine, is, in reality, so hardy and robust, that it is very difficult to destroy it” (H 6:536).<sup>13</sup> Sabl classifies religion as an example of pseudo- and negative convention (34–36, 45–47), and Hume certainly describes the Crusade “as the most signal and most durable monument of human folly, that has yet appeared in any age or nation” (H 1:234).<sup>14</sup> Here we have to remember that Hume left final words on the issue of public credit in a footnote in the 1778 edition of the *History*: “our late delusions have much exceeded any thing known in history, *not even excepting those of the crusades*. For, I suppose, there is no mathematical, still less an arithmetical demonstration, that the road to the Holy Land was not the road to Paradise, as there is, that the endless encrease of national debts is the direct road to national ruin” (H 4:373; emphases added).<sup>15</sup> It might be a thought-provoking question to ask, according to Sabl’s theoretical framework, whether public credit is an example of fundamental conventions or of pseudo-/negative conventions (or of yet another type of conventions). Certainly, none of the dire consequences that Hume predicted—which involved one of three types of death (natural death, violent death, and the death by doctor)—actually happened in his contemporary Britain. Nonetheless, it remains true that every advanced country in the modern world, including the U.S. and Japan, have found it impossible to dispense with their heavy financial deficits. The issue of public credit must be of interest to the author, precisely because it cuts to the foundation of political authority.<sup>16</sup>

In conclusion, I thoroughly welcome and enjoy Sabl’s fresh readings of Hume from the viewpoint of contemporary political theory. The author expressly declares that his book “aspires to build bridges” (20)—bridges that connect not only political theory and political science, but also contemporary politics, philosophy, economics, and intellectual history. I hope that my comments and questions do not disregard the progress the author has made in achieving this aspiration, but rather serve to consolidate this bridge to some degree.

## NOTES

- 1 I thank the Program Committee for the 41st International Hume Society Conference for their financial support for my travel expenses to participate in the panel for which these comments were prepared. This work was partially supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 26380264.
- 2 Andrew Sabl, *Hume's Politics*, hereafter cited in text by page number.
- 3 Russell Hardin, *David Hume: Moral and Political Theorist*, 78–79.

4 “Hume is a dynamic moderate with respect to what I call ordinary conventions, an understated radical with respect to pseudo-conventions, and some sort of conservative with respect to fundamental conventions” (Sabl, 31).

5 Humean liberalism is also paraphrased as “liberalism of enlargement” (88–89), in which “enlarged interests” are contrasted with “extensive sympathy” (49–55).

6 “Hume can escape the alternative posed in *The Federalist* No. 1 that political constitutions must depend either on ‘accident and force’ or on ‘reflection and choice’. Fundamental conventions are distinct from both” (123).

7 Adam Ferguson, *Essays on the History of Civil Society*, 119; Friedrich Hayek, “Individualism: True and False,” 7. I touched on this point in my review of Christopher J. Berry, *David Hume*, 241.

8 In note 34 to page 10, for example, Sabl mentions J. G. A. Pocock’s statement that Hume “was by no means incapable of taking a sanguine view of the present and future, in which ultimate corruption might be averted for a very long time.” He adds that “[h]is successors, one might add to Pocock’s account, would improve on this theory by changing ‘a very long time’ to ‘forever’” (252).

9 David Hume, *History of England*, 2:519, hereafter abbreviated “H” and cited in text by volume and page number.

10 “I am only sorry to see, that the great Decline, if we ought not rather to say, the total Extinction of Literature in England, prognosticates a very short Duration of all our other Improvements, and threatens a new and a sudden Inroad of Ignorance, Superstition and Barbarism” (Hume to the Rev. Thomas Percy in *New Letters*, 198–99).

11 Hume, “Civil Liberty,” 87.

12 “It must be confessed, that forced loans and monopolies were established on many and ancient as well as recent precedents; though diametrically opposite to all the principles of a free government” (Hume, H 5:42).

13 See also “Public Credit,” 363.

14 On Hume’s notion of superstition as a “bad custom,” see Christopher Berry, *David Hume*, 70–74.

15 See also “Public Credit,” 357.

16 Hume admits that a minor merit of public credit lies in its promotion of stable government: “The first visible eruption, or even immediate danger, of public disorders must alarm all the stockholders, whose property is the most precarious of any; and will make them fly to the support of government, whether menaced by Jacobitish violence or democratical frenzy” (“Public Credit,” 355).

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