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*Commerce and Politics in Hume's  
History of England* by Jia Wei (review)

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Jia Wei. *Commerce and Politics in Hume's History of England*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017. ISBN 978-1-78327-187-0, £65.00.

Jia Wei claims in the Introduction to *Commerce and Politics in Hume's History of England* that significant aspects of Hume's achievement as a historian have yet to be properly appreciated. She intends to shed new light on 'the relationship between the three Humes: Hume the political thinker, Hume the historian, and Hume the political economist' (3). She continues:

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 [sic] against the background of commercial revolution; and third, his endorsement of both liberty and authority. (3)

Both the strengths and the weaknesses of Wei's account of Hume's history writing are apparent here. In her focus on the story Hume tells about the development of English commerce she succeeds in drawing out a thread of Hume's complex narrative that has not previously been considered in its own right. The attention she gives to maritime trade in particular is salutary. It is very interestingly complemented in the main narrative by a detailed examination of the way in which the administration of taxes features in the *History*. On the other hand, it is not news that Hume was a 'champion of modernity,' nor that he 'endorsed' both liberty and authority. In the parts of the book where she rehearses these themes, no fresh ground is broken. Generally, Wei's attempt to relate Hume the political thinker to Hume the historian and Hume the political economist is not a success. Her argument would very likely have been more convincing had it been less ambitious.

The larger narrative framework for Wei's analysis of Hume's *History* is, as it had to be, the Harringtonian story of the effects of reforms made to the law of property during the reign of Henry VII. These relaxations of the feudal system made possible the sale and mortgaging of land, which made possible the purchase of luxury goods by the nobility, which in turn provided an impetus to English commerce and trade, which in turn, eventually, caused an increase of the relative influence in English politics of the 'middling' sector of society. In the short term, this amounted also

to a shift in the balance of power away from the nobility toward the crown, and allowed the Tudors to turn England into something approaching an absolute monarchy. In the longer term, it amounted to a shift in the balance of power away from the nobility toward the Commons, and set the scene for the great confrontation between crown and Commons that took place in the seventeenth century. In the first two chapters of her book Wei traces, as she puts it, 'the piecemeal progress of the Tudor government in promoting trade' (37). Wei describes this, convincingly, as a process whereby 'the rise of commerce enabled the Tudors to replace the local jurisdiction of the powerful nobles and clergy with a centralised legal order' (46). Hume, on her account, builds on and significantly qualifies the Harringtonian narrative: 'Henry [VII]'s role as a revolutionary legislator was . . . necessary but not sufficient; it was the rise of commerce that enabled him to use law as a means of removing the vestiges of feudalism' (57). The rise of commerce was supplemented by the Reformation and its attack on canon law as a jurisdiction independent of the crown. Centralisation of authority, however, did not entail financial autonomy for the crown. The exigencies of war finance caused Elizabeth to need to sell off large amounts of crown land. These were 'desperate measures' which, as Wei says, 'were to handicap the financial administration of the Stuarts' (73).

In chapter 3 of *Commerce and Politics in Hume's History of England*, Wei explores in some detail the many ways in which, on Hume's analysis, the financial administration of the Stuarts was handicapped as a result of what had happened in England in the sixteenth century. The disposal of crown lands in the previous reign deprived the crown of a revenue by means of which it could be independent of parliament. Even in a time of peaceful relations with France and Spain, royal expenses far exceeded royal income, meaning that once all possible gifts and loans had been extracted from the nobility and gentry, the crown was in desperate need of the grant by parliament of new tax income. The problem was, as Hume put it, the king 'had not yet acquired the means of influencing those assemblies.' This difficulty was compounded both by grievous inefficiencies in the collection of traditional land taxes, and by the reluctance of parliament to allow the establishment of the professional body of revenue collection necessary as the weight of taxation shifted from land to the excise. In the general euphoria that followed the Restoration, however, parliament relaxed, and granted tonnage and poundage and the entirety of the excise to the king for life. This was a decision with momentous consequences. Trade flourished in the second half of the seventeenth century, and so, as a direct result, did the financial situation of the monarchy. This meant that after the mid-1670s, Charles II felt able to rule without calling parliament, and did so once it became clear that parliament itself felt sufficiently empowered to try to prevent the passing of the crown to Charles's brother James. At this point the stage was set for the climax of a century-long trial of strength between crown and parliament. Parliament won, of course, and there followed the introduction

of what Hume—unlike most Whigs—regarded as a completely new system of government in England.

The final two chapters of the book see Wei's focus move away from detailed exegesis of the *History of England* and toward Hume's interventions in the political debates of the middle of the eighteenth century. In chapter 4 she describes Hume's version of the doctrine that maintenance of a balance of power in Europe was crucial to the maintenance of English—or rather British—liberty, and explains how, on Hume's view, colonial maritime trade had become a crucial component of force necessary to counteract the permanent tendency of European politics toward universal monarchy. Hume's conception of liberty is a recurring theme in the book taken as a whole, and in chapter 5 Wei homes in upon his understanding of the nature, and stability, of the liberties granted to Britons by the constitutional arrangements that followed 1688. It is here, I think, that she comes unstuck. The title of the chapter is 'Public Liberty in Jeopardy,' and it promises to build on Duncan Forbes's work 'by providing a deeper analysis of Hume's account of the way in which the principles of liberty had been integrated into the operational principles of government' (141). In fact the chapter is extremely confusing. It is never made clear what, exactly, is being argued. And Wei herself seems confused about fundamentals. We are told that 'Hume never endorsed Locke's conception of liberty' (161) immediately after being told Hume's idea of liberty 'would later be developed by Richard Price' (159). Price described himself as following Locke's lead in *Observations on Civil Liberty*, and it is hard to think of a contemporary with whom Hume must have disagreed as profoundly about the fundamentals of politics as Price. Things do not become clearer when—in direct contradiction to Forbes's reading of Hume—Wei claims that Hume 'endorsed Toryism' in his last years (168). This book is at its best when it sheds light on aspects of Hume's *History* to which others have not given proper attention.

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