**Politics 2A Hume and Smith: The Scottish Enlightenment**

**David Hume (1711-1776)**

**Hume’s Scepticism**

Hume sets himself up as a de-bunker of established pretensions. His scepticism is applied to existing systems of thought that fall short of his rigorous standards. Hume reaches the conclusion that induction is how we think, but that our only grounds for believing this is custom. The sun will rise tomorrow. Only grounds for believing this is a generalisation from previous experience. Contiguity, Succession, Constant Conjunction.

**Hume’s Political Thought**

Hume’s project is to ‘introduce the experimental method of reasoning into Moral subjects’ (Treatise preface). The idea is that a useful social science must be based on experience. Thus any claim that is made must be supported by evidence: in this case evidence from history or from our experience of life as it is lived. Everything else is useless speculation.

**Of the Original Contract**

## Hume begins by attacking the theories of Divine Right and the Contract. These are not accidental targets. They were the main ideological supports of the two major British political parties the Tories and the Whigs. His point is to clear away these arguments which have been advanced as justification for pre-existing factions.

The idea of contract (mental) would not be known in a time before Society. There is no evidence of a contract (why then are we bound by it?) No factual historical evidence (humans always social) Tacit consent is nonsense. Man carried on board a ship asleep/poor artisan.

‘If the reason be asked of that obedience, which we are bound to pay to governments, I readily answer, Because society could not otherwise subsist.’

Contract theorists say – because we are bound by our word

Why should we keep our word?

Based on a prior convention of promise keeping > and if this is the case then why not understand government in terms of conventions rather than hypothetical contracts?

Also, after the original contract then all subsequent generations submit from convention not an explicit contract > again, why not start from convention.

Origin of ancient governments – fraud/violence as much as consent

Consent arises after violence asserts authority

Time legitimises ‘Antiquity begets the opinion of Right’

‘They imagine not that their consent gives their Prince a title: but they willingly consent, because they think, that, from long possession, he has acquired a title, independent of their choice or inclination.’

Continuity provides stability (useful)

**Treatise and Enquiry concerning Morals**

In the Treatise Hume provides a conceptualised reconstruction of the origin of political society. It does not emerge from a contract; rather it arises from convention as humans come to experience the convenience of having an authority within their social groups. Hume’s example here is that of property. The origins of justice and property explain each other. What he means by this is that property disputes are the original disputes that need arbitration. They give rise to rules of possession and these rules need institutions to enforce them.

We do not undertake this process deliberately. It is only after we have submitted to chiefs that we realise the benefits.

The need for social order then allows us to develop stable expectations. This political stability is central to Hume’s thought on other matters. Once political stability holds and property is defended economic development can take place. Hume was an ardent supporter of free trade and wanted to see a general increase in living standards. Along with this came the prospect of improvement in the arts. Free time provided by wealth would allow us to cultivate the arts and sciences, and this in turn would add to the progress of improvement.

This leads Hume towards conservative conclusions. Social order is vital, so we must reform carefully lest we lose sight of what we had by applying metaphysical ideals. We must not think that we can change human nature. Instead we must reform our evolved institutions to make of it what we can. To this end we can learn from political science based on evidence about how human beings have lived together.

**Adam Smith (1723-1790)**

Following Hume’s general approach Adam Smith engaged in the ‘scientific’ study of morality (The Theory of Moral Sentiments 1759) and the economy (The Wealth of Nations 1776).

*An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*

**Idea 1: The Division of Labour.**

Specialisation and the pin factory: 1 man can make around 20 pins a day, 10 men co-operating can make 48,000 pins a day.

Skill and dexterity, timesaving, machines

The woollen coat and interdependence

Poor benefit most

Division of Labour limited by the extent of the market – The greater the market, the greater the scope for specialisation

Comparative Advantage – Wine in Scotland?

**Idea 2: Trade.**

Self-interest and Knowledge

‘It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages’ (WN I. ii, p. 26-7)

The division of labour is based on ‘a natural propensity to truck, barter and exchange’

The development of Money as a signal of profitable occupation

**Idea 3: Capital Accumulation.**

Wealth is generated by increased production through trade and the profits from this are re-invested in increased production.

The ‘slow and steady’ accumulation of advantage

Savings and investments

NB Not greed rather ‘the natural disposition to improve our situation’

Banks and Banking

Smith’s ‘hero’ is the prudent man who saves and lives within his means; the man who works hard and serves others. He distrust ‘prodigals and projectors’ and governments and businessmen

**Idea 4: Natural Liberty**

Left to themselves under a stable system of law people will direct their productive activity to the area indicated as profitable (by price signals).

The result is a more efficient system of resource and effort distribution than if a government attempted to direct it.

‘The statesman, who should attempt to direct private people in what manner they ought to employ their capitals, would not only load himself with a most unnecessary attention, but assume an authority which could safely be trusted, not only to no single person, but to no council or senate whatever, and which would nowhere be so dangerous as in the hands of a man who had the folly and presumption enough to fancy himself fit to exercise it.’ (WN IV.ii, p. 456)

Against trade restrictions, subsidies and colonialism

The three tasks of Government: Defence, Justice and Public Works

The downside of the Division of Labour – Moral and intellectual damage. The cure: Education and Entertainment.

**Idea 5: The Invisible Hand**

The rich only select from the heap what is most precious and agreeable. They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity, though they mean only their own conveniency, though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. **They are led by an *invisible* *hand* to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species.** When Providence divided the earth among a few lordly masters, it neither forgot nor abandoned those who seemed to have been left out in the partition. These last too enjoy their share of all that it produces. In what constitutes the real happiness of human life, they are in no respect inferior to those who would seem so much above them. In ease of body and peace of mind, all the different ranks of life are nearly upon a level, and the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security which kings are fighting for.

*Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Pt. IV Ch. 1. Glasgow Edition p. 184-5)

But the annual revenue of every society is always precisely equal to the exchangeable value of the whole annual produce of its industry, or rather is precisely the same thing with that exchangeable value. As every individual, therefore, endeavours as much as he can both to employ his capital in the support of domestic industry, and so to direct that industry that its produce may be of the greatest value; every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. **By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an *invisible* *hand* to promote an end which was no part of his intention.** Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it.

*Wealth of Nations* (Bk. IV Ch. 2. Glasgow Edition p. 456)