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István Hont (1947 – 2013)

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Adapted from an address given at the memorial service for István Hont at Kings College, Cambridge in August 2013.

István Hont was born in Budapest in 1947, emigrated to the UK in 1974, and was from 1978 to his death in 2013 a Fellow at Kings College, Cambridge (with the exception of a very brief stint at Columbia University in the 1980s). Hont was one of the leading intellectual historians of his generation, with a special interest in Adam Smith as an intellectual figure who contributed to forming one of the dominant ideologies of incipient capitalism. His combination of overwhelming erudition, extreme intellectual fertility, originality, sharpness of perception and argumentative rigor had to be experienced in the flesh to be appreciated. His book *Jealousy of Trade* (Harvard, 2005) is a recognized masterpiece but gives only a pale reflection of the monumental intelligence that lay behind it. And so in a way the “real” István was the one encountered in supervisions and seminars at Cambridge, especially in the so-called “Monday Seminar” on intellectual history and political thought. In an ideal world any discussion of his intellectual significance would be centered on his interpretation of the period he made his own, the Scottish Enlightenment. Since I don’t have the competence to do this, my remarks will focus, even at the risk of a certain eccentricity of treatment, on some more general features of his approach that are visible even to those of us who are not trained historians.

In an early remark, Nietzsche describes his own project as that of trying to look at the world with the eyes of a “cold angel” who “sees through the whole miserable spectacle,” yet neither bears reality any ill-will, nor finds the world in the least bit “cozy”.¹ This, of course, is a modern variant of Tacitus’ famous declaration of non-partisanship when he

¹ „Ich möchte die Frage nach dem Werthe der Erkenntniß behandeln wie ein kalter Engel, der die ganze Lumperei durchschaut. Ohne böse zu sein, aber ohne Gemüth“ (19 [234]). This is a fragment from 1872-3 [*Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe* ed. Colli and Montinari (de Gruyter, 1980), vol. 7, p. 493]. Although this is a remark specifically about the “value of cognition”, it seems reasonable to adopt it for the purposes described.

asserts that he decided to write the history of the recent past *sine ira et studio*—“without anger or favoritism”. It would have been perfectly understandable if a member of the Senatorial aristocracy like Tacitus had written a history that was motivated by hatred or resentment of those Emperors who took over prestigious functions previously exercised by the Senate. Or he might have been keen to glorify the achievements of his particular faction, to present their motives in the best possible light, to promote their cause. *Ira* and *studium* therefore stand for negative and positive forms of bias, actively favoring or discriminating against one side or the other in the struggle for dominance. Tacitus clearly saw both of these as pitfalls to be avoided.²

Nietzsche’s view is an existential and metaphysical intensification of this basic Tacitean tack. If members of the Roman Senate tended to resent the Emperor because he thwarted their plans and reduced their dignity, and they allowed this to bleed into their account of politics, this was as nothing, Nietzsche thought, compared to the deep-seated general human resentment against reality itself, which continually frustrates us and imposes limits on our action, and against the course of human history, which can disrupt even an Emperor. If an individual Senator sought a sense of security and moral comfort in an exaggerated view of the power, accomplishments and virtue of his own faction, how much stronger is the temptation for humans in general to believe that the world is basically a benign place, or, at any rate, that history is on one’s side? This impulse can take a variety of forms covering a broad spectrum of attitudes. At one end of this spectrum lies a grudging participation in what is recognized as being the only game on offer and at the other end active triumphalism, the “warm” embracing of the status quo as a place in which one can feel completely at home. Finally, if history gives one a nasty surprise, what would be stronger than the temptation to become bitter and go sour on reality itself?

Nietzsche’s image of the “cold angel” is, I wish to suggest, a good foil to use in thinking about István’s work. István was impervious to the siren-songs of coziness, to the *studium* of

² Whether or not he actually succeeded in avoiding them in his history is, of course, another matter. Similarly, it is an open question whether this aspiration could in principle be realized (even if it is not by Tacitus), whether it is a dangerous or an innocent illusion, or whether, even if it is unrealizable, it might retain value as an ideal to be approached asymptotically.

explicit or tacit theodicies, to naive belief in progress, and to the self-congratulatory forms of wishful thinking that are particularly characteristic of modern liberal democracies. Equally, and perhaps more surprisingly, in his work he seemed remarkably resistant to the *ira* that can be one of the effects of the disappointment of deeply rooted hopes—even if, given his background and the events of the historical period in which he lived, he might have had more cause than most.

Although this discussion has been couched in the vocabulary of individual psychology—Tacitus’ *ira*, Nietzsche’s *ill-will*, my own use of “resentment” and “going sour on reality”—what is actually at issue are *structural* features of the interaction between concepts, theories, forms of action and human agents. If we fall back on what look like simple psychological terms, it is because we lack an appropriate and distinctive idiom for speaking about this whole domain. To look at the world through the lens of a theory that has the structure of a theodicy is not *necessarily* to be of a cheerful disposition, but rather to be theoretically committed to a number of assumptions about the world that will affect what else one will be likely to notice, how one will likely process what one perceives, and what courses of action one finds it easy or difficult to envisage.

This reflection might help to dispel the air of paradox that surrounds the application of the image of a “cold angel” to István. “Cold” is certainly not the adjective one would think of using about István as a person, about his attitude toward his subject-matter or about his treatment of it. He was as personally enthusiastic about his interests as anyone could be, and as capable as anyone of being vexed by those who proposed or perpetuated what he took to be untenable views. Personal passion, though, just to repeat, is not the same as structural affirmation of—or metaphysical resentment against—the course of history itself. Nor is resistance to the temptation of coziness a form of “skepticism”, if one construes “skepticism” as a strictly epistemological category. A healthy tendency toward suspension of belief, argumentative counter-suggestability and bloody-minded insistence of seeing “evidence” is of course part of the scholarly ethos, but István didn’t really think he was justified in claiming to know (for certain) *fewer things* than most people did (as would be the case for a classic

skeptic). If anything, the reverse. To return to the quotation from Nietzsche, István wanted to “see through” things. Seeing through comforting or resentment-based illusions doesn’t mean *limiting* knowledge claims. To use an example that is mine rather than István’s, I don’t think I know *less* about the contemporary liberal ideology of rights and democracy than its confused and naive advocates do, but *more*.

A second difficulty one might have with the idea of István as a cold angel is that angels are primarily observers in the messy human process of acting, not participants.³ Yet one of the most characteristic features of István’s thought was the view that human praxis had its own dignity, its own standpoint on the world and its own logic, and was not a mere weak sister of “theory”. The world confronting a political actor is really not much like that confronting an engineer trying to use a pre-given theory to build a bridge, a judge attempting to apply the law in judging a defendant, or a scientist testing a hypothesis. One salient difference is surely that engineering, law and science are limited and rule-governed activities directed at well-defined situations in a way in which politics need not be. I can argue with the engineer about which is the best way to calculate stress, and that can be a question within the competence of engineering. If, however, I begin to ask whether we should build the bridge over this river at all—maybe we don’t have the money or don’t actually wish to encourage fraternization with our obnoxious neighbors—we may quickly exit from the realm of engineering altogether. Politics isn’t internally bounded in this way or so strictly rule-bound. There is the phenomenon of “routine politics”—electoral strategy in times of peace and stability—but it is also clear that this routine politics can at any time turn into something else. At some point the Cossacks may turn their weapons not on the peasants in the square but on their own officers. The political actor must always take this possibility into account in a way in which the engineer *qua* engineer need not take account of the possibility that people might decide they don’t want a bridge at all. From this idea that there is a distinctive

³ In this they differ from Homeric gods, who are invulnerable but have both the capacity for complete detachment and for active engagement. Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history” is presented as essentially a passive spectator of what has happened: he stares in open-mouthed horror at the past as its catastrophes pile up in front of him, a single mountainous mass of ruins that reaches to the skies, and he is propelled *backward* into the future by a wind that blows from a utopian past. An ‘angel’ (from Greek word for ‘announce’ [ἀγγέλλειν]), is essentially a messenger. If angels do intervene, it is as mere ministers of Divine Will, so without fully human forms of independent decision-making.

standpoint of practical agents, it is but a small step to the further claim that the study of political thought ought to take seriously the standpoint of agents who are facing uncertain and antecedently ill-defined situations which call for action, and thus are not like lawyers or engineers. And if this is right, the study of the *history* of political thought must somehow take account of this specific viewpoint of the political actor, the viewpoint of ‘praxis’. The ‘angel’ as archetypical non-agent therefore seems out of place in this picture.

István’s view was praxis-centered, but the argument given in the previous paragraph can and must be run the other way around as well. Although to understand political thinkers of the past, we must understand *their* politics, it is also the case that our relation to past politics cannot be the deeply practical relation we have to contemporary politics. My relation to the expansion of the Roman Republic in the second century BC *cannot* be the same kind of thing as my opposition to the creeping—and not so creeping—privatization of the NHS which is currently being implemented by the UK government. We have no alternative but to have something more like an “angelic” relation to the Roman Republic than we do to the Coalition Government. This doesn’t mean we can’t in some sense change the past by what we do now. What we do now does affect, no matter how infinitesimally, how *relevant* certain features of the past will be and *in what way* they will be effectively available to us. Appeals to “relevance” are potentially subject to serious misuse, most often because they can foster highly disagreeable and often ideologically motivated forms of myopia, but the possibility of such misuse should not blind us to the fact that “relevance” is not a mere epiphenomenon but is rather a constitutive characteristic of history. Past thought can be close to us to a greater or lesser degree.

Of course, István thought, one studied the history of political thought in order to understand, and thus presumably improve, our own politics. “Why else would you do it?” he once remarked to me. He didn’t have a theoretically elaborated view on the relation of present and past praxis in general—no one does, and it is possible that it is even a mistake to think that one should or could have a *theory* of this. Perhaps contemporary political action,

contemporary theories and historical reflection form something like a singular and shifting force field within which we must move. If so, István moved in it with great skill.

To write about a recently deceased friend is to put oneself into an uncomfortable and artificial situation because one must act as if one were the recording angel of the life of someone one loved, summing him up. There is perhaps nothing to be done about this except perhaps to point out that this is an artifact of the situation of grievous loss in which those who knew István find ourselves. It is customary in such cases to reflect that we at least have the man's works. That is true. But it gives no consolation, because those works are no replacement for the presence of his living voice.