2. POLITICS AND CULTURE IN HUME’S HISTORY OF ENGLAND

Simon Kow

J.G.A. Pocock has remarked that “Hume is the only major philosopher to have produced a major work of historiography, and to have expounded his philosophy through the medium of historiography without the aid of a historicist philosophy of the kind appearing in the next century”.¹ Nevertheless, while Hume’s History of England (1754–62) may have been considered “for at least a hundred years, the standard history of the English nation”,² it was relatively neglected thereafter until recent decades and is not as commented upon by interpreters of Hume as such works as A Treatise of Human Nature. Indeed, the relation between Hume’s history and his philosophy is far from clear, not least because Hume makes no explicit reference in his history to the Treatise, the two Enquiries, or other such works regarded as central to his philosophical thought.³ At best, Hume’s status as the first “philosophical historian”⁴ should be taken in a broad sense; as Pocock points out, “philosophy” in Hume’s time “very often denoted a fixed determination to have nothing to do with epistemology, metaphysics or what could otherwise be termed ‘minute philosophy’”.⁵

Although the degree to which Hume’s “minute philosophy” and his historical work can be linked poses major difficulties for the interpreter, we

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³ Norton, however, argues that history and philosophy are deeply connected in Hume’s thought, but that as a sceptic, Hume came to see that a science of human nature is impossible for both the philosopher and the historian. At best, historical judgement is a form of opinion. See Norton, “History and Philosophy”, pp. xlvi–l. More recently, Nicholas Phillipson has traced some ways in which Hume’s philosophical development culminated in his historical work. See Phillipson, Hume (New York, 1989).
⁵ Pocock, Barbarism, p. 177.
can nevertheless elucidate the political theory underlying Hume’s *History of England*. There have been, however, conflicting interpretations of the character of Hume’s political philosophy as conveyed through the *History*. Following upon Laurence Bongie’s careful study of Hume’s influence on French counter-revolutionary thought, which suggests the essentially conservative nature of Hume’s political thinking in the *History*, Donald Livingston and Nicholas Capaldi stress Hume’s proto-Burkean distrust of foundationalist and speculative theory and conception of all moral and political norms as contextually grounded (as opposed to concepts of rights, liberty, and so forth as eternal and unchanging principles). In contrast, Duncan Forbes describes Hume as a “sceptical Whig” who shared the Whiggish view that English history manifests the progress of European civilization but criticized the chauvinistic characterization of absolute monarchies in France and elsewhere on the continent as inferior to English government. John B. Stewart is more explicit in arguing for Hume’s liberalism: the *History of England* culminates, after all, in the liberty gained from the 1688 revolution and subsequent constitution. He would reject both conservative Toryism and the revolutionary republicanism of sympathizers of the French Revolution; liberal Whiggism since the 1790s was closer to Hume’s position.

What explains such divergent perspectives on the political theory in Hume’s historical work? Hume’s standard of impartiality on political and historical matters particularly lends itself to diverse readings of his historical work. Hume’s account especially of the reigns of the Stuarts and the Glorious Revolution—the first two volumes of the *History* to be published—seeks to steer between Whig and Tory interpretations of England’s political history. In a letter to John Clephane from 1756, two years after the first volume appeared, Hume remarked that in the *History*, “[m]y views on things are more conformable to Whig principles; my representations of

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