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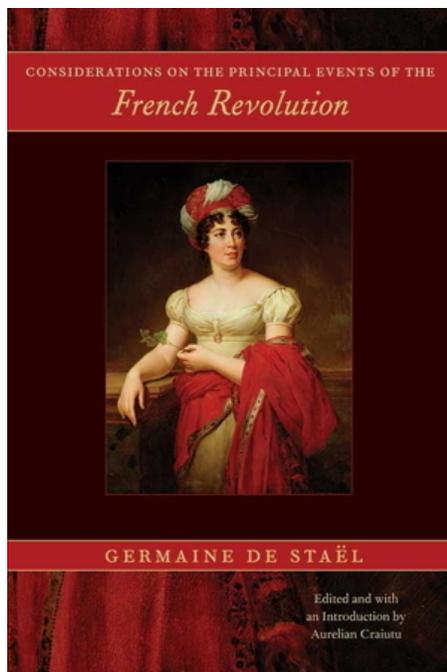
A FORUM FOR THE DISCUSSION OF MATTERS PERTAINING TO LIBERTY

AURELIAN CRAIUTU, "HOW TO COMBAT FANATICISM AND THE SPIRIT OF PARTY: GERMAINE DE STAËL'S LESSON"

A DISCUSSION HELD IN MARCH, 2019.

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[Germaine de Staël \(1766-1817\)](#)



[Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution](#)

Summary

The year 2017 marked the bicentenary of Germaine de Staël's death (1766-1817). Although her name almost never appears in textbooks or histories of political thought in the English-speaking world her political thought is undeniably rich and brilliant. The recent revival of interest in French political thought, as manifested by the publication of many works by and about Constant, Tocqueville, or Guizot, has not extended to Madame de Staël. Therefore, it is high time for her to finally receive the place that she deserves in the history of political thought. This would be an overdue act of justice for a woman who defied many conventions of her time and made a name for herself in a highly competitive

and male-dominated world. But there is a second reason why the rediscovery of Madame de Staël's political thought and the publication of her political works should be a priority today. Having lived in revolutionary times, she had a unique opportunity to witness firsthand the importance of ideas and the power of passions in society and political life. In this month's Liberty Matters discussion Aurelian Craiutu, professor of political science at Indiana University, will present arguments why she should no longer remain a neglected political thinker. He is joined in the discussion by Benjamin Hoffmann, assistant professor of early modern French Studies at The Ohio State University; Catriona Seth, the Marshal Foch Professor of French Literature at the University of Oxford; and Steven Vincent, professor of history at North Carolina State University.

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Once all these ideas and arguments are on the table an open discussion between the various parties takes place over the course of the following weeks. At the end of the month the online discussion is closed.

We plan to have discussions about some of the most important online resources which can be found on the Online Library of Liberty website. We will link to these resources wherever possible from the essays and responses of our discussants so our reader can find out more about the topic under discussion.

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About the Authors

Aurelian Craiutu is professor of political science at Indiana University, Bloomington, where he also directs the Tocqueville Program. He earned his Ph.D. in political theory from Princeton University in 1999 and has published extensively in the field of modern French political thought from Montesquieu to Raymond Aron. Craiutu's publications include *Liberalism under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), *Tocqueville on America after 1840* (2009; with Jeremy Jennings), *America through European Eyes* (Cambridge, 2009, with Jeffrey C. Isaac), *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748-1830* (Princeton, 2012), and *Faces of Moderation: The Art of Balance in an Age of Extremes* (Penn Press, 2017). He also edited *Madame de Staël's Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution* (Liberty Fund, 2008) and François Guizot's *History of the Origins of Representative Government in Europe* (Liberty Fund, 2002). He has received awards and grants from many institutions including the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, the James Madison Center (Princeton University), the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Earhart Foundation.

Benjamin Hoffmann is an assistant professor of early modern French Studies at The Ohio State University. His research focuses on 18th-century French literature and philosophy, with a special interest in the introduction of "new worlds" in French consciousness during the Age of Enlightenment. He's the author

Additional Reading

3. [Political Use of Enthusiasm](#) [Posted: March 12, 2019]
3. [Catriona Seth, "A Cosmopolitan in Life and Works"](#) [Posted: March 14, 2019]
4. [Aurelian Craiutu, "The Many Windows of the World"](#) [Posted: March 14, 2019]
5. [K. Steven Vincent, "Arenas for the Cultivation of Sociability and "Enthusiasm""](#) [Posted: March 19, 2019]
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7. [Benjamin Hoffmann, "Against Machiavelli: The Question of Selfishness"](#) [Posted: March 19, 2019]
8. [Benjamin Hoffmann, "Against Machiavelli: The Prince, a Political Manual for Bonaparte"](#) [Posted: March 21, 2019]
9. [Aurelian Craiutu, "The Cosmopolitanism of the Coppet Group"](#) [Posted: March 21, 2019]
10. [K. Steven Vincent, "The Importance of Constitutions and Political Institutions"](#) [Posted: March 21, 2019]
11. [Aurelian Craiutu, "Madame de Staël on the Liberty of the Moderns"](#) [Posted: March 25, 2019]

of *Posthumous America: Literary Reinventions of America at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018). His most recent book, *Les Paradoxes de la postérité*, was published by Éditions de Minuit in 2019. Dr. Hoffmann is also the author of a critical edition of Lezay-Marnésia's *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio* (1792), published by Pennsylvania State University Press in 2017, and of four novels published in France: *Le monde est beau on peut y voyager* (Bastingage, 2008), *Anya Ivanovna* (Bastingage, 2010), *Père et fils* (Gallimard, 2011), and *American Pandemonium* (Gallimard, 2016).

Catriona Seth, FBA, is the Marshal Foch Professor of French Literature at the University of Oxford and a fellow of All Souls College. She has published widely on the literature and cultural history of France in the 18th century. She directed the edition of three of Germaine de Staël's works for Gallimard's prestigious "Pléiade" series (*Mme de Staël, OEuvres*, Paris: 2017).

K. Steven Vincent is a professor of history at North Carolina State University, where he teaches courses in European intellectual history and modern French History. His research focuses on French political ideas of the modern era. Publications include *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism* (Oxford UP, 1984); *Between Marxism and Anarchism: Benoît Malon and French Reformist Socialism* (Univ. of CA Press, 1992); and *Benjamin Constant the Birth of French Liberalism* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011). His latest book, *Élie Halévy: Republican Liberalism Confronts the Era of Tyrannies* is forthcoming from University of Pennsylvania Press.

- [Online Resources](#)
- [Works Mentioned in the Discussion](#)

LEAD ESSAY: Aurelian Craiutu, "How to Combat Fanaticism and the Spirit of Party: Germaine de Staël's Lesson" [Posted: March 4, 2019]↩

"Thought is nothing without enthusiasm."
Germaine de Staël

Staël's Uncertain Place in the Liberal Canon

The year 2017 marked the bicentenary of Germaine de Staël's death. Commemorated in Europe, the event went mostly unnoticed on this side of the ocean.^[1] Gender might have played a role in this regard, yet I believe that the reasons for this neglect are in fact deeper, having to do with Staël's eclectic and moderate agenda that fits no ideological camp properly speaking. Like a true moderate, she falls between political camps, speaking to both yet satisfying neither in the end. As a result, two centuries after her death, Staël's place in the canon of political theory remains fuzzy. Her name almost never appears in textbooks or histories of political thought in the English-speaking world. In a recent book dedicated to Staël's political thought, Chinatsu Takeda remarked that "the fact that Staël never summarized her political thought in a single book"^[2] might be one reason for this oversight. Yet, if Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, hardly a systematic work, made him famous, the same should have been the case for Staël's *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution* as well.

What really matters in the end is that Staël's political thought remains underappreciated in spite of its undeniable richness and brilliance. The recent revival of interest in French political thought, as manifested by the publication of many works by and about Constant, Tocqueville, or Guizot, has not extended to Madame de Staël.^[3] Therefore, it is high time for her to finally receive the place that she deserves in the history of political thought.

This would be an overdue act of justice for a woman who defied many conventions of her time and made a name for herself in a highly competitive and male-dominated world. But there is a second reason why the rediscovery of Madame de Staël's political thought and the publication of her *political* works should be a priority today. Having lived in revolutionary times, she had a unique opportunity to witness firsthand the importance of ideas and the power of passions in society and political life.

Of all the passions she examined in her works, three seem to have preoccupied her above all, and all of them remain relevant for us today: fanaticism, the spirit of party, and enthusiasm. In what follows I propose to take a closer look at the connections between them and political moderation, the defining principle of Madame de Staël's political agenda.^[4]

The Spirit of Party and Fanaticism

It was during the Directory that Staël reflected on the dangers of fanaticism and the spirit of party.^[5] References to fanaticism can be found in *Réflexions sur la paix intérieure* (1795), while the concept of the spirit of party received a full chapter in *De l'Influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations* (1796), where it precedes the discussion of crimes. She paid special attention to writing the book about passions. The text was conceived in turbulent times and remained unfinished.^[6] The entire political landscape was still haunted by the ghosts of the Terror, the omnipresent threat posed by Jacobinism, and the

émigrés' desire for revenge. The spirit of party was in full swing. Moderation and the center seemed utopian goals. Madame de Staël's plan was to rally all the friends of liberty in the fight against the looming specter of anarchy and extremism. To this effect, she advocated a form of liberty *above* or *beyond* all parties.^[7]

There were several obstacles to achieving Staël's ideal secured by the existence of a strong center. The most salient among them was *l'esprit de parti*, which Madame de Staël analyzed in chapter seven of the first part of *De l'Influence des passions*. This chapter is seminal for understanding her critique of fanaticism and extremism and her endorsement of political moderation. She begins by distinguishing the spirit of party from self-love (*amour propre*) as manifested by an excessive confidence in the legitimacy of one's ideas and principles. The influence of the spirit of party is not the same in all countries and ages; it differs from country to country and from age to age. To understand the force of the spirit of party, she writes, one must have been contemporary with a great political or religious revolution. Extraordinary events must first cause a special fermentation, as it were, in order for this passion to develop and give rise to fanaticism. Only big political debates allow the spirit of party to develop into a raging and all-consuming passion bordering on fanaticism. It is only under those circumstances that, fueled by pride, emulation, revenge, and fear, the spirit of party can become an ardent passion, capable of inspiring fanaticism. When this occurs, *l'esprit de parti* requires total faith, regardless of the object to which it applies.^[8] It becomes a form of secular religion.

Then the spirit of party takes full control and "seizes upon the mind like a kind of dictatorship," which silences every other authority, including reason and sentiment.^[9] A dominating idea absorbs all others and is proclaimed supreme. This leads to a new form of slavery that commands to those under its yoke both the goals and the means that they ought to choose. Once the means and ends are determined, they become an article of faith, a dogma, not subject to discussion any longer. In Staël's view, pure fanaticism as defined by total commitment to a single idea or principle can be found only in a small number of people. They are "credulous spirits," ready to resort to violence if needed. Their propensity to violence and extremism is fueled by a perverse form of utilitarian and Manichaean thinking devoid of any form of affection or sentiment. These people can have sympathy for others only in proportion to whether they serve the cause of the party to which they belong. Any form of disagreement is treated with harshness and intolerance.

Staël argues that this extreme form of the spirit of party is not a prerogative of any class in particular; it can be found among all ranks and in all classes. Both educated individuals and unenlightened ones, she writes, might fall prey to fanaticism under certain circumstances. Philosophy itself, "when enflamed to an extraordinary pitch," can become superstition and worship of prejudices. Enlightened minds, who loath absurd prejudices, might still fall prey to an extreme form of the spirit of party. When this happens, they lose the faculty of reason and become oddly similar to the supporters of error and prejudice.^[10]

What makes the extreme form of the spirit of party pernicious is not only its ruthlessness when it comes to choosing means and ends and its visceral intolerance toward opponents (seen as enemies). It is also the fact that it brings about a type of

feverishness that blinds people to their real, long-term interests. Staël gives the example of the intransigent right side of the Constituent Assembly in 1789-1791 in France. The members of the aristocratic party could have successfully passed or avoided certain measures if they had been willing to work with the moderates—*les constitutionnels*. But the nobles seemed to have loved more their cause and cared more about the purity of their principles than anything else. In the end, they misunderstood their real interests and misread what the greatest dangers were. They were unwilling and unable to compromise on key issues.

This is where fanaticism shows its intransigence in its clearest form. In the eyes of those who embrace an extreme form of the spirit of party, a triumph gained by a compromise is never a real victory, but a defeat. Compromises call into question any commitment to purity. Hence, fanatics reject concessions and choose intransigence. They prefer taking their enemies down with them to triumphing with them. For these intransigent spirits, "[t]he purity of a dogma is deemed of more importance than the success of the cause."^[11] On this view, truth is always on one side, error on the other; those who defend the same cause are labelled good, the others evil. It is simply unacceptable to acknowledge that one's opponents might have a kernel of truth after all. The practical implications of this intolerant *forma mentis* are significant. We have no duties toward those who think differently from us other than to try to convince and re-educate them. The road to the most abominable crimes is thus wide open.

Fanatics, Staël warns us, are convinced that they act out of good faith and believe that they only serve a greater impersonal cause that has nothing to do with their individual interests or personal situation. They deny any trace of egoism or bias in what they do. They claim to be mere cogs in the wheel that perform nothing more than their assigned task. For them, no sacrifice is too big if it is supposed to advance the supreme cause of their party. Hence the following puzzle: while fanatics are eventually led to condone many immoral acts and even legitimize crimes, they think they act virtuously, sometimes even altruistically. They have no fear and feel no remorse even when they condemn to death their fellow countrymen who reject their agendas.^[12]

It is surprising then that Madame de Staël, while being perfectly aware of the dangers of this intoxication of both mind and soul, chose to propose another form of enthusiasm as a cure for fanaticism. How can one explain this apparent paradox?

Enthusiasm as a Cure for Fanaticism

Enthusiasm and fanaticism are different, yet they are often confounded; from this confusion, enthusiasm often receives negative connotations that limit its appeal. In Staël's view, this is a "great mistake"^[13] for there is a clear distinction between the two concepts. Fanaticism is an exclusive passion the object of which is an opinion, idea, or principle. Such was the case with the passion for equality, "the subterranean volcano of France,"^[14] that came to dominate and transformed the French political scene after 1789. Fanaticism, Staël argues, corrupts any valid principle by drawing extreme implications from it. It deduces everything from one single idea—be that equality, reason, justice, liberty, or *salus populi*—elevated to the status of dogma. Nothing similar applies to true enthusiasm, which has no resemblance to fanaticism whatsoever. "Enthusiasm is tolerant, not through indifference, but because it makes us feel the interest and the beauty of all things," she writes. "Enthusiasm finds, in the musing of the heart, and in depth of thought, what fanaticism and passion comprise in a single idea or a single object."^[15]

Staël's understanding of true enthusiasm is quite expansive and has a Romantic tone that should not go unnoticed. In her view, "enthusiasm is connected with the harmony of the universe: it is the love of the beautiful, elevation of soul, enjoyment of devotion, all united in one single feeling which combines grandeur and repose."^[16] She adds: "Enthusiasm signifies *God in us*. In fact, when the existence of man is expansive, it has something divine."^[17] As such, enthusiasm is highly conducive to pure thought and imagination, unlike self-love, which promotes cynicism and ridicule and destroys all passions for the noble and the beautiful. If our hearts and our minds are not defended by enthusiasm, she argues, they are likely to fall prey to insolence and ignorance.

Madame de Staël further distinguishes between sincere and affected enthusiasm and notes that sometimes pure enthusiasm might be replaced by other things, among them war. "War, undertaken with personal views," she writes, "always affords some of the enjoyments of enthusiasm.... It is the action of risking ourselves which is necessary, it is that which introduces enthusiasm into the blood."^[18] Thus understood, enthusiasm is not without its dangers. But all things considered, it allows us to go beyond the narrow confines of our individuality and egoism: "Whatever leads us to sacrifice our own comfort, or our own life, is almost always enthusiasm."^[19] It is enthusiasm that makes us realize the importance of our duties and encourages us to fulfill them in an honorable manner. As such, "enthusiasm alone can counterbalance the tendency to selfishness."^[20] It teaches us the limits of a narrow prudence and allows us to devote ourselves to pursuing what is fine, generous, and noble in life, beyond our self-interest and material survival.

Enthusiasm and morality are closely intertwined in Staël's thought. "We ought to choose our object by enthusiasm," she claims, "but to approach it by character; thought is nothing without enthusiasm, and action is nothing without character; enthusiasm is everything for literary nations, character is everything to those which are active; free nations stand in need of both."^[21] Our souls would lose themselves if something animated did not snatch them away from "the vulgar ascendancy of selfishness."^[22] It is nothing but pure and unalloyed enthusiasm that gives life to what is invisible and makes us interested in what has no apparent immediate action on our worldly comfort. She concludes: "No sentiment, therefore, is more adapted to the pursuit of abstract truths."^[23]

As such, enthusiasm occupies a special place among all the feelings of the human heart: it confers the greatest happiness, the only real happiness that enables us "to bear the lot of mortality in every situation in which fortune has the power to place us."^[24] It protects us against pride, base ambition, and self-love. Abstaining from doing evil is not enough to make us happy. We need to learn not to repress generous and noble emotions, we must give free reign to our imagination, properly nurtured. We can escape mediocrity, deadness of feeling, and the monotony of ideas only if we open ourselves to enthusiasm. But this is a form of enthusiasm that has nothing in common with fanaticism. Life lived without enthusiasm leads to degradation; it is life lived as little as possible, life in a vast and joyless desert, without any consciousness of what is truly beautiful and virtuous.

Last but not least, it is Staël's positive view of enthusiasm that underlies her rejection of any form of Machiavellianism.^[25] "Life is not such a withered thing as selfishness has made it," she affirms; "all is not prudence; all is not calculation."^[26] Prudent or shrewd calculation ought not to preside over everything in life, nor should the actions of men always be judged only according to

their immediate success. Enthusiasm and other noble virtues should be nurtured precisely so that we can successfully resist the temptation of utilitarianism and Machiavellianism in political life. A world in which individuals would only consider each other as obstacles or instruments in their ruthless pursuit of power would be an inhuman one in which generous passions would have no place.

Moderation, "the silken string running through the pearl-chain of all virtues" ...

It is no surprise that those who take the spirit of party to extremes end up hating anyone who defends nuances, compromise, and prudence, that is, anyone who embraces moderation. Undoubtedly, Madame de Staël could not forget that during the French Revolution, moderation was denounced on both aisles as a mask worn by hypocrites or radicals seeking to advance their own agenda and interests. Moderation, it was argued, had been used as a shrewd strategy for promoting the spirit of faction. For Robespierre, the moderates were the most dangerous enemies of the people and the constitution. The fact that they used a deceiving rhetoric, he added, was meant only to hide from people's view their allegedly dark plans and wicked intentions.^[27]

Madame de Staël thought otherwise. In her view, political life requires moderation, prudence, and compromise, three virtues that fanatics can never understand or practice. "Everything is exchange, everything is compensation [...] Where, on this planet, does one see a good without any inconveniences? [...] A legislator can always endorse only the law or the institution which contains a greater dose of good than evil."^[28] That is why fanaticism defined as obsession with one single idea is not only a dangerous passion; it is also simply self-defeating in the long term.

It is no coincidence that Madame de Staël believed that fanaticism is the passion most dangerous for the human species, especially in revolutionary times. To fight against it, many things are needed. Fanaticism must first be properly identified and distinguished from other related concepts. Once properly identified, it must be combatted with sound ideas and reflections. When writing *Des Circonstances actuelles* in 1798, Staël seemed convinced that philosophers were uniquely positioned to do just that. "The philosophers," she wrote, "are those who made the Revolution, and they will be those who will end it."^[29]

Was she overly optimistic, one might ask?

The answer may be yes. For during the Revolution, philosophers had succumbed to what Staël once called the metaphysics of vagueness and an excessive passion for abstractions. They lent their support to those who tried to subject society to the reign of a single law or principle. Their hubris teaches us an important lesson that Burke and others also highlighted in their writings. When we attempt to arrange society according to a predetermined plan and ignore the lessons of experience and tradition, we are certain to dissolve everything and mix everything up without being able to create any sustainable order. The best antidote to all this, Staël believed, was moderation, "the silken string that runs through the pearl-chain of all virtues."^[30] Her lesson remains relevant for us today.

Endnotes

^[1.] Two recent books deserve to be mentioned: Biancamaria Fontana, *Germaine de Staël: A Political Portrait* (Princeton, NJ:

Princeton University Press, 2016) and Chinatsu Takeda, *Mme de Staël & Political Liberalism in France* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). Several biographies of Madame de Staël have appeared in English as well: Francine Du Plessix Gray, *Madame de Staël: The First Modern Woman* (New York: Atlas, 2008), Angelica Gooden, *Madame de Staël: The Dangerous Exile* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Renée Weingarten, *Germaine de Staël and Benjamin Constant: A Dual Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), and Maria Fairweather, *Mme de Staël* (London: Carroll and Graf, 2005).

^[2.] Takeda, *Mme de Staël & Political Liberalism in France*, p. 3.

^[3.] Of her genuinely political works, only one is available at this moment in an English translation: *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution*, ed. Aurelian Craiutu (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2008). Also see *Ten Years of Exile*, trans. and ed. Avriel H. Goldberger (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000).

^[4.] I have discussed Staël's political moderation in detail in Aurelian Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748-1830* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 158-97.

^[5.] The importance of enthusiasm was discussed at length in the last chapters of *De l'Allemagne*, a book written in 1810 but published in London only in 1813. The concept of fanaticism appeared in both *Des circonstances actuelles* (written in 1798) and *Considérations*.

^[6.] Only its first part was published; the second part was supposed to deal with political institutions but was never written.

^[7.] Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds*, pp. 172-73.

^[8.] See Madame de Staël, *A Treatise on the Influence of Passions upon the Happiness of Individuals and of Nations* (London: George Cawthorn, 1798), p. 176. The name of the translator was not specified.

^[9.] See Staël, *A Treatise on the Influence of Passions*, p. 178.

^[10.] Staël, *A Treatise on the Influence of Passions*, p. 177. In Staël's opinion, this was the case of an enlightened man like Condorcet who, she claimed, was possessed by the spirit of party in spite of his *lumières*.

^[11.] Staël, *A Treatise on the Influence of Passions*, p. 180.

^[12.] See Staël, *A Treatise on the Influence of Passions*, p.183.

^[13.] Madame de Staël, *Germany*, trans. O. W. Wright, vol. II (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1871), p. 360. A caveat is in order. The original title of the book is *De l'Allemagne*, hence the correct translation should have been *On Germany*.

^[14.] Madame de Staël, *Considerations*, p. 120.

^[15.] Staël, *Germany*, II, p. 364.

^[16.] Staël, *Germany*, II, p. 360.

^[17.] Staël, *Germany*, II, p. 360.

^[18.] Staël, *Germany*, II, p. 361.

^[19.] Staël, *Germany*, II, p. 360.

- [20.] Staël, *Germany*, II, p. 361.
- [21.] Staël, *Germany*, II, p. 362.
- [22.] Staël, *Germany*, II, p. 363.
- [23.] Staël, *Germany*, II, p. 363.
- [24.] Staël, *Germany*, II, p. 367.
- [25.] On Madame de Staël's view of Machiavelli, see Giuseppe Sciara, *Un'oscura presenza: Machiavelli nella cultura politica francese dal Terrore alla seconda repubblica* (Roma: Editura di storia e letteratura, 2018), pp. 69-82, 89-91.
- [26.] Staël, *Germany*, II, p. 237.
- [27.] See Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds*, p. 77.
- [28.] Staël, *La Passion de la liberté*, ed. Laurent Theis (Paris: Laffont, 2017), p. 160.
- [29.] Staël, *La Passion de la liberté*, p. 254.
- [30.] Joseph Hall, *Christian Moderation* (London: 1640), pp. 5-6; <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A02520.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>>.

RESPONSES AND CRITIQUES ↩

1. Catriona Seth, "A Woman's Words" [Posted: March 5, 2019] ↩

On January 22, 2019, French president Emmanuel Macron quoted Germaine de Staël in a speech given at Aachen to mark the signing of a new Franco-German treaty. He mentioned the emotion he felt when he recalled something Staël said: "When my heart is looking for a word in French and can't find it, I sometimes look for it in the German language."^[31] A fine sentiment for a true European, and one who had actively promoted cross-border friendship like Staël, except that, according to academic specialists questioned as part of a TV investigation,^[32] whilst she might have been sympathetic to the idea, she apparently left no trace of having actually ever said or written this; nor has the Elysée palace come up with a source. This paradoxical anecdote—one can only rejoice at Staël being quoted by France's top statesman but deplore that words are being put in her mouth—ties in with Aurelian Craiutu's claim that her actual contributions to political thought are underappreciated. I believe gender has much to do with this state of things,^[33] and I would like to stress this by looking at an early work, absent from Prof. Craiutu's essay, which gives an insight into how Staël developed her rejection of fanaticism and the spirit of party but defended the idea that emotions might have a place in politics.

The brief text I want to deal with came out in August 1793 under the title *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine*, or *Reflections on the Queen's Trial*.^[34] The queen was of course Marie Antoinette, who since August 2 of that year, when she was removed from the Temple where the royal family was being held, had been in solitary confinement in the Conciergerie, often the antechamber of the guillotine in those troubled times. When Staël took up her pen, the widowed queen's fate was uncertain and rumors abounded. Would she be held indefinitely? Would she be sent back to her native Austria, perhaps as part of an exchange of prisoners?^[35] Would she be put on trial? Staël sought, by her text, to avoid the last of the three possible occurrences.

The pamphlet shows Staël's belief in the power of rhetoric. She hoped her text could stop the revolutionaries from giving in to violence. She believed extremist statements had corrupted the people of France and hoped that her reasoned words could be heard above the fray.

Staël stated something which can still teach us lessons in our time of "post-truth" and "fake news": public opinion, which, as A. Craiutu rightly points out, was an important force in her eyes, can be manipulated. Marie Antoinette, because she was a woman and attracted numerous gender-based attacks, was wrongly accused of having bankrupted France and of many other crimes. Staël's interest in virtuous enthusiasm made her invite the reader to identify with the deposed queen as a human being, a daughter, sister, wife, or mother, someone who had suffered, for instance, by having her children taken away from her. This reinstatement of emotion as a possible power for good in judgment and politics is one aspect of Staël's thought which has often been underestimated or misunderstood—A. Craiutu rightly underlines, in his essay, that she saw enthusiasm as a possible cure for fanaticism.

In the passage to which I have just referred, Staël was aiming her message at other women. Elsewhere in the text, Staël addressed the revolutionaries. Though at pains to point out that she had no professional take on the matter and was not a lawyer,

she posed an important question which had been at the heart of Enlightenment debates at least since Beccaria published his *On Crimes and Punishments* in 1764: that of making the punishment fit the crime. She showed that in *Ancien Régime* France the queen had no official role or power and suggested that it would therefore be wrong to put her on trial in the same way as you would try someone with recognized political agency like the late king. She stressed that Marie Antoinette had wronged nobody and that many people would be prepared to stand up and admit to having benefitted from her private generosity. This distinction between a reviled public figure and a benevolent individual is in some ways reminiscent of how Rousseau, one of Staël's tutelary figures in intellectual terms, had presented himself in works like his *Dialogues*.^[36] Staël's contention, again one which still holds true, was that, as judges, we owe it to humanity to be generous when deciding upon the fate of fellow human beings. This led her to call for unity beyond the spirit of party: whatever one's politics, she contended, there are cases in which the common good demands we should all come together and be cool-headed and fair. This is something Staël exercised in her private life. For instance, she was immensely generous toward exiles of all political opinions to the extent at times of risking her personal safety: misfortune entitled anyone to her disinterested support.

Staël and Marie Antoinette had met on several occasions, though by all accounts they never really had time for each other. Staël simply signed her 1793 brochure "*Par une femme*," "By a woman," claiming that revealing her identity would be of no service to the cause she was defending but also that she had firsthand knowledge of what had gone on at court.^[37]

What the writer saw in the queen's fate was a threat to the place women might be allowed in politics: one of the Revolution's first major engagements was the march of the women on Versailles in October 1789, which had led to the royal family being brought to Paris. The Revolution was becoming less and less favorable to any implication of women in the public sphere and more and more violent, far from the ideal regime the liberal-minded aristocrats with whom Staël consorted had been dreaming of.^[38] Staël, like the queen, paid the price of her visibility, being attacked in pamphlets and caricatures but also exiled from France. Towards the end of the piece, the author once again spoke to members of her sex:

Je reviens à vous, femmes immolées toutes dans une mère si tendre, immolées toutes par l'attentat qui serait commis sur la faiblesse, par l'anéantissement de la pitié, c'en est fait de votre empire si la férocité règne, c'en est fait de votre destinée si vos pleurs coulent en vain.^[39]

(I return to you, women all sacrificed through such a tender mother, all sacrificed by the attack which would be committed on weakness, by the annihilation of pity. Your rule is over if ferocity reigns. Your fate is sealed if your tears run in vain).

Staël's only arms were her words. She was eloquent even in this hastily drafted text. As her *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution* shows, she came to consider that the Revolution was a political necessity against which no action taken by the king or queen could have had any effect:

[The Queen, Marie Antoinette, was one of the most](#)

[amiable and gracious persons](#) who ever occupied a throne: there was no reason why she should not preserve the love of the French, for she had done nothing to forfeit it. As far, therefore, as personal qualities went, the King and Queen might claim the hearts of their subjects; but the arbitrary form of the government, as successive ages had moulded it, accorded so ill with the spirit of the times, that even the Virtues of the sovereigns were overlooked amid the accumulation of abuses. When a nation feels the want of political reform, the personal character of the monarch is but a feeble barrier against the impulse. A sad fatality placed the reign of Louis XVI in an era in which great talents and profound knowledge were necessary to contend with the prevailing spirit, or, what would have been better, to make a fair compromise with it.^[40]

Staël was reflecting with hindsight in the *Considerations*. In the *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine*, she was writing on the spur of the moment and hoping for action rather than taking stock of events. She was horrified by the death of Marie Antoinette on October 16, 1793, and in the *Considerations* recalled it as an act of barbarism:

[The assassination of the Queen, and of Madame Elizabeth](#).^[41] excited perhaps still more astonishment and horror than the crime which was perpetrated against the person of the King; for no other object could be assigned for these horrible enormities than the very terror which they were fitted to inspire.^[42]

Staël was dejected that her pamphlet had had no effect, that her rational words had not swayed her audience. As she wrote to fellow author Isabelle de Charrière, it had been a useless effort and indeed one which increased her vulnerability as a target in the revolutionaries' eyes. By executing Marie Antoinette, they had, as Staël predicted, turned the queen into a martyr, an enemy more dangerous in death than in life^[43]—again, an example worth thinking about in the current climate.^[44] The queen's execution was, as I have written elsewhere, a triple defeat "for words, for women, for liberty."^[45]

Clearly, then, as A. Craiutu contends in his essay and as the title of a session held at UNESCO in Paris on June, 22, 2017, stated, Germaine de Staël is a "woman for our times."^[46]

Endnotes

^[31.] The sentence Macron attributed to Staël was the following: '*Lorsque mon cœur cherche un mot en français et qu'il ne le trouve pas, je vais parfois le chercher dans la langue allemande.*'

^[32.] <https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/europe/allemande/desintox-traite-daix-la-chapelle-la-citation-d-emmanuel-macron-n-existait-pas_3186759.html>. Viewed on Feb. 15, 2019.

^[33.] A. Craiutu writes: "Gender might play a role in this regard." (Staël's bicentenary went unmarked in the USA).

^[34.] My references are to Staël, *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine* (1793) in Catriona Seth, *Marie Antoinette. Anthologie et dictionnaire* (Paris: Robert Laffont, "Bouquins," 2006), pp. 150-67.

^[35.] This is what later happened to Marie Antoinette's only surviving child, Marie-Thérèse-Charlotte (1778-1851), "Madame Royale," subsequently the "duchesse d'Angoulême": in 1795 she was sent to Vienna, to her mother's family in exchange for French prisoners of war.

^[36.] The dialogues were published posthumously in 1782 as *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques*. See, e.g., Philip Stewart's critical edition in Rousseau's *Œuvres complètes*, Raymond Trousson and Frédéric Eigeldinger, dir., (Geneva, Slatkine, and Paris: Champion, 2012), vol.3.

^[37.] Staël's identity was rapidly discovered and, in defiance of all diplomatic conventions, the Swedish embassy was violated as a result—her husband was the Swedish ambassador in Paris.

^[38.] On the increasingly male turn the Revolution took, see Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

^[39.] *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine*, p. 167.

^[40.] *Considerations*, pp. 46-7.

^[41.] Marie Antoinette's sister-in-law, younger sister of the late Louis XVI, "Madame Elisabeth," was also guillotined. She died on 10 May 1794.

^[42.] *Considerations*, p. 361.

^[43.] "[...] en l'immolant vous la consacrez à jamais. Vos ennemis vous ont fait plus de mal par leur mort que par leur vie" (by sacrificing her, you are consecrating her forever. Your enemies have done you more harm through their death than through their life), she wrote, *Réflexions*, p. 164.

^[44.] This resonates clearly with Staël's vision of fanaticism as formulated by A. Craiutu in his essay: "[F]anatics reject concessions and choose intransigence. They prefer taking their enemies down with them to triumphing with them."

^[45.] See Catriona Seth, "Germaine de Staël and Marie-Antoinette," *Germaine de Staël. Forging a Politics of Mediation*, Karyna Szmurlo, ed. (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2011), pp. 47-62; here p. 62.

^[46.] See *Madame de Staël. Femme de notre temps. Actes du colloque organisé à l'occasion du bicentenaire de la mort de Germaine de Staël, Romancière et essayiste (1766-1817)*, jeudi 22 juin 2017, Maison de l'UNESCO.

2. K. Steven Vincent, "Germaine de Staël, Pragmatic Liberalism, and *Sensibilité*" [Posted: March 7, 2019]↩

Germaine de Staël was an important writer of the era of the French Revolution and best known for her novels and her book on Germany.^[47] I agree with Professor Craiutu that her political thought merits more attention than it has generally received. Professor Craiutu elegantly highlights the "moderation" of Staël's political stance, which is certainly one of its notable elements. I would wish to emphasize equally her pragmatic focus on which action and/or ideal required emphasis at any particular time. Whether or not she recommended moderation – a concept that suggests an avoidance of extremes in all situations – depended on the nature of the situation she confronted. I would prefer to

characterize her political stance as a form of "pragmatic liberalism."

Professor Craiutu also usefully highlights the positive nature of "enthusiasm" for Staël and how it was considered an important counter to the negative nature of "fanaticism." Again, I agree that these were central elements of Staël's thought; however, I would wish to place them within the wider cultural movement of *sensibilité*, a cultural shift that focused on many positive and negative emotions and passions.

Moderation and Pragmatic Liberalism

Staël's political ideas were deeply influenced by the constitutional ideas of her father, Jacques Necker, who recommended a constitutional and representative system that would protect "rights" and ensure a sharing of power between the legislative and executive branches of government, and who insisted on energetic public involvement. These remained central to Staël's politics. Professor Craiutu astutely emphasizes how Staël translated this into a moderate position during the first decade of the French Revolution. Present with her father in Versailles during the so-called October Days in 1789, she was shocked by the violence of the crowd and concerned about the safety of the royal family. In July 1792, over a year after the Flight to Varennes, she contacted King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette with an elaborate plan (which they rejected) for a second attempt at escape from the country. She remained a firm supporter of the French monarchy as the Revolution became more radical – with the popular violence and proclamation of the Republic in August and September 1792, the execution of the king in January 1793, the creation of the revolutionary tribunal and the Committee of Public Safety in early 1793, and the Terror during 1793-1794. In August 1793, Staël published *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine*, in which she claimed that the queen had sentiments "favorable to true liberty" and "had constantly opposed projects hostile to France." The new Republic, she argued, would be damaged if the queen were condemned or physically harmed.^[48]

Following the Terror, Staël argued that the political changes of the Revolution could not be reversed without further disruption and that therefore the Republic should be supported. In late-1794, she published *Réflexions sur la paix, adressées à M. Pitt et aux Français*, appealing to moderates inside and outside France to avoid the "spirit of party" that was tearing the country apart, a "spirit" that unfortunately animated the radical left and right.^[49] She encouraged all sides to adopt a policy of peace and to avoid the extreme emotions easily stirred up in times of warfare. She was especially critical of *émigrés* who "fall back on prejudices of the fourteenth century," "treat political questions as principles of faith," and "reject as heresies considerations drawn from what is useful, sage, and possible."^[50] Reasonable royalists, she argued, should separate themselves from feudalism and unite around the interests of property and peace, which in France at this moment was identified with the moderate Republic. Reasonable republicans, similarly, should avoid radical demands, and substitute peace and justice for the furies and enthusiasms associated with Robespierre and the Terror.

Staël followed this in 1795 with *Réflexions sur la paix intérieure*, another strident call for a closing of the ranks around the current moderate Republic.^[51] She wished to distance herself from the Bourbon pretender to the throne, who called for revenge against republicans associated with the Revolution. And she pushed back against the Jacobin Left, whose defenders called for the continued ascendancy of the radical Montagnards and their

allies among the *sans-culottes* (Parisian working-class supporters of the Jacobin Republic). Staël argued that the while the Republic had been "impossible" in 1789, it had become essential after the Terror. Moreover, the unyieldingly reactionary actions of the surviving Bourbons and of *émigrés* meant that the monarchy was no longer an option for France. The Republic had become the regime that best united people with different sentiments and motives. "The hate of despotism, the enthusiasm for the Republic, the fear of vengeance, and the ambition of the talented," she wrote, "all speak with the same voice."^[52]

In *Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution* (written in 1798 but unpublished until 1906) – arguably her most impressive political writing – Staël expressed regret that she had continued to support the monarchy after the June 1791 Flight to Varennes. If the monarchy had been suppressed at that time, she now argued, France would have been spared some of the traumatic episodes of the following few years.^[53] During the years she worked on these manuscripts, she argued that it was essential that those subscribing to a "liberal" political position take a stand between the extremes.^[54] They should not compromise with the Royalist Right, identified with the Old Regime monarchy, nor with the Jacobin Left, identified with the excesses of the Terror. Her stance was informed, as Professor Craiutu correctly points out, by a demand for a moderate middle way.

In these works Staël also defended the legal protection of individual rights, especially the right to property; a representative system of government that separated and balanced power; and a "juridical order" that was independent of both the legislative and the executive power. She also discussed in detail the specific circumstances of France at this historical moment and insisted that these be taken into consideration when proposing the specific institutional structure of the polity. Her stance was characterized by a pragmatism that insisted on the acceptance of the constraints of circumstance. As she wrote in 1795:

It is obvious that there is no absolute system of government that does not need to be modified by circumstances. And what circumstance is more influential than a revolution? ... This boiling fermentation produces a new world; one day is able to render impossible the plan of the previous day; and for those who advance always toward the same goal of liberty, the means continuously change.^[55]

The circumstances in late-1790s France recommended both the Republic and moderation. The same pragmatism at other times, however, recommended a more strident stance. During the years of the Empire, for example, Staël firmly opposed the regime of Napoleon.^[56] It is this which makes me wish to qualify the "moderate" label. While I do not disagree that moderation often marked her politics, I would emphasize that there were times when she was "immoderate." "Pragmatic liberalism," I would suggest, captures her distinctive political stance.

"Enthusiasm," "Fanaticism," and *Sensibilité*

Staël's liberalism, as Professor Craiutu usefully insists, was also centrally concerned with analyzing social *moeurs* and human character. She was especially sensitive to how revolutions encouraged strong passions and furies, dangerous excesses that led people to trample the rights of others. For stability to be attained, she argued, it was necessary for violent emotions to be constrained, "fanaticism" rejected, and for positive emotions – "enthusiasm," "pity," and "generosity" – to be encouraged.

This is especially marked in *De l'influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations*, written between 1793 and 1796.^[57] and in *Des circonstances actuelles*, mentioned above. Staël argued that there was a similarity between religious fanatics and political fanatics in that both attached everything positive to "the despotism of a single idea," a despotism that would "destroy the sole guarantee of virtue, sympathy."^[58] Fanaticism is a "singular passion ... that unites the power of crime with the exaltation of virtue." Especially during a revolution, it was important to control dangerous "fanatical" outbursts; it was necessary to "constrain factious passions."^[59] What she most worried about was the corrosive nature of hatred and the closely related desire for revenge. Vengeance, she reasoned, was a contagious passion that was difficult to assuage; unchecked, it would quickly poison social relations. It needed to be contained if social and political stability were to be achieved. Uncontained, it would undermine the possibility of the emergence of a stable *esprit publique* that would allow discussion and reason to prevail.

How was this to be done? Staël recommended encouraging generosity and, especially, compassion (*pitié*), the sentiment that grows from identification with the suffering of others.^[60] She turned to this moral-sentimental theme in hopes of countering the dangerous passion of revenge which she believed infused the counterrevolutionary forces that wished to return to the Old Regime. It would also counter the excessively stern sentiment of personal sacrifice associated with the invocation of revolutionary virtue during the Terror. "It is in the milieu of a revolution that *la pitié*, that involuntary movement in all other circumstances, ought to be the rule of conduct."^[61] More than ever, she reasoned, France needed *pitié* and *générosité*. As Professor Craiuti points out, this involved a rehabilitation of "enthusiasm," a passion that had had negative associations with religious exaltation and unreason in the thought of Enlightenment luminaries like Bayle, Locke, and Voltaire. There was a limit to Staël's rehabilitation, however, because she believed that enthusiasm could also be dangerously combined with military action.^[62] "The enthusiasm that inspires the glory of arms," she wrote in 1800, "is the only enthusiasm that becomes dangerous to liberty."^[63]

Staël's Liberalism

The essential elements of Staël's political liberalism emerged during the French Revolution. She favored the principles of civil liberty, popular sovereignty, and judicial independence, but recognized that making any one of these absolute would potentially risk undermining the others. How to proceed required a pragmatic judgment of how best to balance these principles so as to avoid a return to regressive royalism or adventurous Jacobinism. This "centrist" position, as recent scholars have pointed out, is one of the distinguishing characteristics of modern French liberalism, making it markedly different from the English liberal tradition that assumed the existence of opposing parties committed to the peaceful alternation of political power. One legacy of the French Revolution was a more unstable political culture, a bipolarization of the political landscape, situating liberals like Germaine de Staël in the center between groups that were not committed to representative parliamentary institutions. This often led the liberals to take a "moderate" position between the extremes. At times, however, it led Staël to take an "immoderate" position against the government. Which way she turned depended on her assessment of the forces operating at that moment. This required a pragmatic assessment of what actions would be necessary to provide the best hopes for liberty and peace.

Staël's liberalism was also sensitive to the cultural issue of

social *moeurs*, especially when these were inflamed during periods of internal disorder or external attack, or when citizens were suspicious of their neighbors and leaders – exactly the dangerous situations France faced during the Revolution. It was critical, she argued, to create a political culture that avoided fanaticism and narrow self-interest and that fostered respect, compassion, and enthusiasm. It is this mix of civil, political, and cultural dimensions that makes Staël's socio-political views relevant to our era.

Endnotes

^[47.] Her best-known novels are *Delphine* (published in 1802) and *Corinne* (1807); her book on Germany is *De l'Allemagne* (1810/1813).

^[48.] "Réflexions sur le procès de la reine," in *Œuvres complètes de Mme. La Baronne de Staël*, t. 2 (Paris: Treuttel et Würtz, 1820), pp. 1-33, these quotes p. 21.

^[49.] "Réflexions sur la paix, adressées à M. Pitt et aux Français," in *Œuvres complètes*, t. 2, pp. 35-94.

^[50.] *Ibid.*, p. 54.

^[51.] "Réflexions sur la paix intérieure," in *Œuvres complètes*, t. 2, pp. 95-172. This was written and printed in 1795 but never offered for sale.

^[52.] *Ibid.* pp. 100-02.

^[53.] Madame de Staël, *Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution et des principes qui doivent fonder la République en France*. Written in the late-1790s, this work was unpublished until 1906 (Paris: Fischbacher, 1906). There is a newer critical edition, edited by Lucia Omacini (Genève: Droz, 1979).

^[54.] Upon her reentry into Paris in May 1795, Staël opened a salon at the Swedish embassy on the *rue du Bac*, which became a central meeting place for moderate republicans and constitutional monarchists who hoped to stabilize the post-Terror Republic. Her close ties with nobles, however, and purported actions to assist *émigrés* who wished to return to France led to attacks by politically influential figures. Much to her annoyance, they were able to convince the government to force her exit from France in mid-December 1795. She took up residence at the Necker château Coppet in the *pays de Vaud*, which became a vibrant center of liberal culture and politics during the following years.

I have argued elsewhere that Staël and her companion and lover during these years, Benjamin Constant, were the first to use the term "liberal" to refer to their political stance. See my *Benjamin Constant and the Birth of French Liberalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), esp. pp. 39-80.

^[55.] "Réflexions sur la paix intérieure," p. 120.

^[56.] See Mme. De Staël, *Ten Years of Exile*, translated by D. Beck (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972). Staël writes, for example, "Someday, if future generations grant Bonaparte a tomb, people will pass peacefully in front of his ashes, whereas during his lifetime no human being could enjoy either tranquility or independence" (p. 141).

^[57.] Germaine de Staël, *De l'influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations* (Paris: Ramsay, 1979), pp. 53-256.

[58.] *Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution et des principes qui doivent fonder la République en France*, p. 255; for the discussion of "fanaticism," see pp. 255-68.

[59.] *De l'influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations*, pp. 67-68.

[60.] In effect, Staël recommended the cultivation of positive sentiments and more specifically of the positive "sentiments prior to reason" (*amour-de-soi-même* and *pitié*) that Rousseau had argued were the bases of all morals. Staël's first publication was devoted to Rousseau. She argued that "Rousseau's genius" was to rediscover "natural sentiments." She was critical of Rousseau's rejection of representative politics. *Lettre sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau* ([Paris]: [no publisher], 1788), pp. 48-49, 78.

[61.] *De l'influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations*, p. 252.

[62.] I discuss the role of "enthusiasm" in the thought of Constant and Staël in more detail in "Benjamin Constant, the French Revolution, and the Origins of French Romantic Liberalism," *French Historical Studies*, 23:4 (2000), pp. 545-74, esp. pp. 561-65.

[63.] Germaine de Staël, *De la littérature considérée sans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* [1800] (Paris : Classiques Garnier, 1988), p. 322. See also Staël's critical comments concerning "l'amour de la gloire" in *De l'influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations*, pp. 83-99.

3. Benjamin Hoffmann, "A Genealogy of Staël's Political Concepts" [Posted: March 7, 2019]↪

I welcome the opportunity to share my reactions to Professor Aurelian Craiutu's timely paper on Germaine de Staël's enthusiastic defense of moderation – a paradox he has illuminated thanks to his thoughtful comments on Staël's political vocabulary. Craiutu's paper has done a masterful job at analyzing three passions—fanaticism, the spirit of party, and enthusiasm—whose destructive power Staël witnessed firsthand during the Revolutionary period, and I am grateful for his insights on the reasons why she holds an uncertain place in the liberal canon. I certainly agree with Craiutu's chief explanation: if Staël rarely appears in textbooks and histories of political thought, it is certainly due to the widespread suspicion against political moderates. Craiutu himself has done much to advance our understanding of political moderation and reminds us, in this paper and in previous books as well, of two of the most frequent criticisms against moderates: cowardice and hypocrisy.[64] Indeed, moderates are regularly suspected of being too timid to fight for their own convictions—when they are not accused of lacking convictions altogether. Moderates, seen this way, suffer from a moral flaw, while their tendency to make compromises goes hand in hand (or so it seems to their adversaries) with irresoluteness. Hypocrisy is another reproach frequently formulated against them, as if their willingness to accept contradiction is nothing but a way of advancing a personal agenda behind a deceiving mask of tolerance: *larvatus prode* (*I go forward bewitched*) is the motto of all moderates, at least if we are to believe their opponents. Seen in this light, Staël's stance on political moderation would explain the relative oblivion to which her political work has succumbed.

Nonetheless, I would argue that a suggestion made in passing by Aurelian Craiutu is certainly another hint that Staël scholars can follow to explain her place not only in the political canon but in the literary one as well. Craiutu proposes that her gender may be another factor to take into consideration, and I believe he is onto something here. Staël was indeed the object of misogynistic attacks during her own era, some of which came from Napoléon himself.[65] The emperor notoriously detested her independent spirit at a time when her freedom of thought was considered to be at odds with the socially constructed behavioral norms of her gender. "Emperor Napoléon's greatest grievance against me," Staël wrote in *Ten Years of Exile*, "is my unflinching respect for true liberty." [66] This prejudice did not go away with time, as shown by her widespread designation in French discourse as *Madame de Staël*. In her case, as in so many others—*Madame de Graffigny*, *Madame de Duras*, *Madame Riccoboni*, *Madame du Châtelet*, *Madame de Genlis*...—this almost innocuous-seeming (and perfectly useless) insistence on her gender is fraught with misogynistic undertones. Recent scholarship is, fortunately, underlining Staël's role "in the creation of a new discourse on women's relationship to politics and art" and moving toward a recognition of the originality of her intellectual work in a field largely dominated by men.[67]

That being said, the core of my response to Aurelian Craiutu's paper will not be about Staël's place in the canon. I would like to complement his analysis of the three aforementioned passions by suggesting an intellectual genealogy linking Staël's work to Voltaire and the Enlightenment period. Indeed, Staël's political vocabulary owes much to Voltaire's campaign against the "infâme" (the name he dismissively gave to the Catholic Church) while providing a distinctly Romantic reinterpretation of these very concepts. Thus she offers a case study of the intellectual evolution from the 18th to the 19th century, from the Age of Reason to the Age of Sentiments.

Germaine de Staël knew Voltaire personally. Her mother, Suzanne, developed an epistolary relationship with the philosopher and started a subscription for the sculpting of his statue by Jean-Baptiste Pigalle.[68] Suzanne also took her daughter to meet Voltaire in 1778, shortly before his death the same year.[69] The similarities between Staël's and Voltaire's careers are many. Like Voltaire, Staël experienced a forced exile and used the models of both Italy and Germany to do what her predecessor accomplished with England: "she used, at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, an idealized foreign culture to indirectly criticize the political situation in her own country, where the Revolution, which swept aside the Old Regime, did not lead to democratic and liberal institutions but to a new form of militarized despotism." [70] In his essay, Aurelian Craiutu demonstrates that, fueled by a great political revolution and the burning passions it arouses, the *spirit of party* rapidly degenerates into *fanaticism* while another passion, *enthusiasm*, may hold the cure to contain it. While they are central to Staël's analysis of the Revolutionary period, these three concepts are hardly new as they had been repeatedly used by Voltaire in the context of his fierce criticism of the Catholic Church. Before observing what Staël exactly owes to Voltaire, it is worth noting that her intellectual work can be described as both an appropriation and a transfer of concepts previously coined by Voltaire: she borrowed a vocabulary the Enlightenment philosopher had widely used before her, although she deployed it within a different intellectual conversation, the context of political discourse rather than religious critique. While she understood that Voltaire's irreverence towards the Church was a direct reaction to the atrocities the Protestants (her own fellow believers) experienced during and after the reign of the Louis XIV, she had strong reservations about

Voltaire's anti-Christianism: "[Several writers, above all Voltaire](#), were highly reprehensible in not respecting Christianity when they attacked superstition."[\[71\]](#) Thus Staël applied the reading grid Voltaire created to identify the causes and mechanisms of religious zealotry to her own analysis of political passions. This transposition is perfectly logical as Staël understood politics (as Craiutu demonstrates) to be a form of *secular religion* that elicited the same kind of excesses the Christian faith had previously allowed. Her *Considerations on the Principle Events of the French Revolution* indeed draws a direct parallel between religious and political fanaticism: "[the two elements of religious fanaticism and political fanaticism](#) always subsist; the will to dominate in those who are at the top of the wheel, the eagerness to make it turn in those who are on the bottom. This is the principle of all kinds of violence; the pretext changes, the cause remains, and the reciprocal fury continues the same."[\[72\]](#)

"Fanaticism" is a key concept in Voltaire's work and is widely used in both his literary and philosophical production. The complete title of his 1736 play *Mahomet* is *Fanaticism, or Mahomet the Prophet* while the *Portable Philosophical Dictionary* published three decades later, in 1764, dedicated one article, broken down in five sections, to the concept of "Fanaticism". In his essay, Aurelian Craiutu identifies several components of Staël's understanding of political fanaticism: in particular, its characteristic "ruthlessness" and propensity to take hold of anybody's mind, no matter the rank or the education of its host. In that respect, she is very much indebted to Voltaire's description of the frightening consequences of fanaticism:

...[\[L\]et us contemplate the horrors of fifteen centuries](#), all frequently renewed in the course of a single one; unarmed men slain at the feet of altars; kings destroyed by the dagger or by poison; a large state reduced to half its extent by the fury of its own citizens; the nation at once the most warlike and the most pacific on the face of the globe, divided in fierce hostility against itself; the sword unsheathed between the sons and the father; usurpers, tyrants, executioners, sacrilegious robbers, and bloodstained parricides violating, under the impulse of religion, every convention divine or human—such is the deadly picture of fanaticism.[\[73\]](#)

In her *Considerations*, Staël also condemned the fury unleashed by the French Revolution and underlined the singularity of this period by insisting on the exceptional violence it provoked: "[The events which we have been recalling](#) until this point have been the only kind of history for which we can find examples elsewhere. But an abyss is now about to open under our feet; we do not know what course to pursue in such a gulf, and the mind leaps in fear from disaster to disaster, till it reaches the annihilation of all hope and of all consolation."[\[74\]](#) In addition, Voltaire insisted on fanaticism's method of diffusion by comparing it to a disease of the mind, thus underlining its contagious nature: "[Fanaticism is, in reference to superstition](#), what delirium is to fever, or rage to anger."[\[75\]](#) This horrifying sickness can be contracted by anyone, including the greatest minds, such as Newton who fell victim to it: "[the exalted Newton](#) imagined that he found the modern history of Europe in the Apocalypse.... [I]t seems as if superstition were an epidemic disease, from which the strongest minds are not always exempt."[\[76\]](#) Craiutu reminds us that Staël felt the same way about another remarkable intellect: indeed, she thought that the great mathematician Condorcet was also possessed by the fever of political fanaticism during the French Revolution.

It is nonetheless in the identification of fanaticism's remedy that Voltaire's and Staël's views strikingly differ. Aurelian Craiutu illuminates for us Staël's recourse to enthusiasm as an unlikely, yet powerful ally to treat the epidemic of fanaticism. Her understanding of the nature and efficacy of enthusiasm stood in stark opposition to Voltaire's views on the subject. Indeed, according to Voltaire, "enthusiasm" should be treated with as much distrust as "fanaticism." First, it is another kind of "disease" that can be caught by anyone; it also tends to be excited by the "spirit of party"; and it is by definition alien to reason: "[What is most rarely to be met with](#) is the combination of reason with enthusiasm. Reason consists in constantly perceiving things as they really are. He, who, under the influence of intoxication, sees objects double is at the time deprived of reason."[\[77\]](#) Voltaire would never turn towards the passion of enthusiasm to cure fanaticism. According to him, fanaticism's only remedy is the spirit of philosophy: "[There is no other remedy for this epidemical malady](#) [fanaticism] than that spirit of philosophy, which, extending itself from one to another, at length civilizes and softens the manners of men and prevents the access of the disease. For when the disorder has made any progress, *we should, without loss of time, fly from the seat of it, and wait till the air has become purified from contagion.*"[\[78\]](#) In his essay, Craiutu sheds light on the reasons why Staël, on the contrary, considered enthusiasm a cure for fanaticism: it leads individuals to sacrifice petty interests to the common good, to adopt moral and generous conducts, and, overall, to understand that they are part of a community with intertwined interests. In that respect, Staël's understanding of enthusiasm was completely at odds with Voltaire's and signaled a marked intellectual evolution between the Enlightenment and the Romantic era. In her quest to cure the most frightening excesses of political fanaticism, Staël did not place her confidence in the "spirit of philosophy" heralded by Voltaire. She rather turned towards a passion: a spontaneously shared feeling of connection between beings.

To conclude, I'd like to ask if Staël's remedy for fanaticism holds more promise to ease political passions than Voltaire's confidence in the spirit of philosophy. I am inclined to say yes. After all, in the passage quoted above, Voltaire himself does not give many indications as to how we should use the power of reason to soothe the minds of those who have been contaminated by the fury of fanaticism. He recommended only a prudent exile ("*we should, without loss of time, fly from the seat of [fanaticism], and wait till the air has become purified from contagion*"), a solution that has obvious limitations: going away while nature runs its course does not provide individuals with a great sense of agency and control of their destinies. By encouraging us to recognize in ourselves a feeling of connection to our fellow human beings, by inviting us to feel that we are all part of an interconnected system where selfish interests are always self-defeating in the long run, as they tend to hide the fact that personal happiness cannot be solidly ensured without preoccupation for the well-being of those who live around us, Germaine de Staël's romantic, *spiritual* defense of enthusiasms holds a promising lesson for assuaging the political passions of our time.

Endnotes

[\[64.\]](#) On the topic of political moderation, see by Aurelian Craiutu: *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748-1830* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012) and *Faces of Moderation: The Art of Balance in an Age of Extremes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

[65.] On Staël's intellectual career, see Maria Fairweather, *Madame de Staël* (London: Little Brown Book, 2013); see also Francine du Plessix Gray, *Madame de Staël: The First Modern Woman* (Atlas & Co., 2008) and Christopher J. Herold, *Mistress to an Age: A Life of Madame de Staël* (New York: Grove Press, 2002).

[66.] Germaine de Staël, *Ten Years of Exile*, trans. Doris Beik (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), p. 4.

[67.] Judith E. Martin, *Germaine de Staël in Germany: Gender and Literary Authority (1800-1850)* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011), p. 2. In *Germaine de Staël: A Political Portrait* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 3, Biancamaria Fontana observes that gender has been a crucial factor in determining the manner in which her contemporaries and posterity have judged Staël: "As to her posthumous reputation, historians have often ridiculed her political ambitions and assumed she was always led by her 'infatuation' with some more or less deserving male personality. They have also diminished her political role, downgrading her backstage canvassing to feminine intrigue, and reducing her contributions to that of a somewhat overambitious and hyperactive salon hostess."

[68.] See René Pomeau, *Voltaire en son temps*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1988-1994, vol. 4), pp. 425-29.

[69.] On Germaine de Staël's and Voltaire, see by James F. Hamilton, "Mme de Staël, Partisan of Rousseau or Voltaire?,"

SVEC 106 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1973), pp 253-65.

[70.] Edward Ousselin, "Germaine de Staël et Voltaire : de l'usage des modèles littéraires étrangers," *Dalhousie French Studies*, vol. 92, Fall 2010, p. 68. My translation.

[71.] Germaine de Staël, *Considerations on the Principle Events of the French Revolution*, newly revised translation of the 1818 English edition, ed. with an introduction and notes by Aurelian Craiutu, Indianapolis (IN: Liberty Fund, 2008), p. 42.

[72.] Germaine de Staël, *Considerations on the Principle Events of the French Revolution*, p. 51.

[73.] Voltaire, "Fanaticism" in *The Works of Voltaire: A Contemporary Version. A Critique and Biography by John Morley, notes by Tobias Smollett, trans. William F. Fleming* (New York: E.R. DuMont, 1901), 21 vols. Vol. V. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/354#Voltaire_0060-05_21>.

[74.] Germaine de Staël, *Considerations on the Principle Events of the French Revolution*, p. 354.

[75.] Voltaire, "Fanaticism."

[76.] Voltaire, "Fanaticism."

[77.] Voltaire, "Enthusiasm" in *The Works of Voltaire*. Vol. IV. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/353#Voltaire_0060-04_1587>.

[78.] Voltaire, "Fanaticism,"our emphasis.

THE CONVERSATION ↩

1. Aurelian Craiutu, "Madame de Staël, Our Contemporary" [Posted: March 8, 2019] ↩

Montesquieu once wrote: "*Il ne faut pas toujours tellement épuiser un sujet, qu'on ne laisse rien à faire au lecteur. Il ne s'agit pas de faire lire, mais de faire penser.*" ("One should not try to always exhaust a subject so that nothing is left for the reader to do. The real question is not to make someone read, but to make someone think.") He was certainly right if one judges by Catriona Seth's, Steven Vincent's, and Benjamin Hoffmann's thoughtful responses to my essay on Germaine de Staël's writings on fanaticism and enthusiasm. Whether drawing upon lesser-known texts such as Staël's *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine* (*Reflections on the Queen's Trial*, 1793), placing her works within the wider cultural movement of *sensibilité*, or showing the similarities and differences between Staël's analysis of fanaticism and Voltaire's critique of this nefarious passion, the three responses shed fresh light on key aspects of Staël's writings and invite us to take our dialogue in new directions.

Catriona Seth's commentary highlights the ways in which Staël regarded Queen Marie Antoinette's execution as a triple defeat "for words, for women, and for liberty." Seth raises interesting questions about the role of women in society, while Vincent's and Hoffmann's responses point out the links between religious and political fanaticism and comment on the pragmatic nature of Staël's liberalism. After noting the originality of Staël's analysis of political passions, Vincent singles out the peculiar nature of her moderation, noting that there were times when she behaved immoderately and adopted a form of pragmatism that might surprise even her friends. In turn, Hoffmann argues that Staël's political vocabulary and emphasis on passions offer a fruitful case-study of the intellectual evolution from the 18th to the 19th centuries, that is, from the Age of Reason to the Age of Sentiments. In this regard, he notes, Staël "applied the reading grid Voltaire created to identify the causes and mechanisms of religious zealotry to her own analysis of political passions," while rejecting his virulent anti-Christianism. These are all important points that I hope we will continue to discuss here. They prove that Staël is an original and important author whose writings illustrate so well the values and principles embraced by Liberty Fund: liberty, responsibility, and civility.

To begin our conversation, I would like to focus on a few points on which we all agree. Germaine de Staël was a larger-than-life figure who fascinated her contemporaries and interpreters. During her lifetime, some admired Staël for her ideas and unique gift for conversation; others envied her fabulous wealth. After all, she was the daughter of Jacques Necker (1732-1804), one of the richest men in Europe at that time and a prominent politician and political thinker. Still others were intrigued by her adventurous lifestyle. Almost everyone who met Staël in the salons of Paris, Coppet, London, Vienna, Moscow, or St. Petersburg was impressed by her sparkling and unforgettable personality. Unfortunately, she did not live long enough to play the leading intellectual and political role that she hoped for during the Bourbon Restoration, which witnessed a liberal renaissance in France. After suffering a debilitating stroke in February 1817, she died five months later on July 14, 1817, leaving unfinished her political testament, *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution*. The posthumous publication of her book in 1818 transformed Staël into what a modern historian (Laurent Theis) called "the historical and political muse of the

Restoration."^[79] *Considerations* became a main reference point for a new generation of liberals who came of age during the Bourbon Restoration and remained an object of special interest for liberal-minded intellectuals until the 1850s.^[80] In the chapter dedicated to Staël in her superb book *Les salons de Paris*, the Duchess d'Abrantès unambiguously claimed that Staël was "the most remarkable woman of her time"^[81] for whom social conversation was an inescapable necessity.

It is then even more surprising that Staël's political thought has been unduly neglected in the recent past. There are a few important differences and interesting paradoxes here. If the dual bicentenary of both Staël's death and the publication of her political *magnum opus* was overlooked in North America, known for its strong feminist movements, it did not go unnoticed in Europe, a place where feminism is arguably less vocal but perhaps more eloquent.^[82] In 2017 the prestigious Pléiade collection published a long-overdue collection of her literary works edited by Catriona Seth. A substantial edition of Staël's most important (though not all!) political works was published by Theis in the well-known Bouquins series at Robert Laffont.^[83] A new critical edition of Staël's works has begun being published under the auspices of *la Société des études staëliennes*. Divided into three parts—*Œuvres critiques*, *Œuvres littéraires*, and *Œuvres historiques*, each containing three volumes—this new critical edition has yet to be completed but has already become indispensable to anyone interested in doing research on Staël. Finally, an international conference devoted to her was organized in November 2017 at the Suor Orsola Benincasa University in Naples, Italy, with the participation of major scholars from several European countries.

Regrettably, on the American side of the ocean, all this is barely known, and the bicentenary of Staël's death passed largely unnoticed by political theorists and historians of political thought. To the best of my knowledge, no new editions of her political and literary works appeared in English to mark this event. The reasons for this oversight are complex. As Benjamin Hoffmann remarks, if Staël holds an uncertain place in the liberal canon, it is also due to the widespread suspicion against political moderates, often accused of hypocrisy, cowardice, or weakness. I can hardly agree with him more on this issue. According to Catriona Seth, there is no doubt that this oversight has something to do with Staël's gender. In turn, Steven Vincent points to her pragmatic liberalism linked to her moderate political agenda, which often placed Staël between warring factions. A few historians are still inclined to reduce Staël's life to a host of anecdotes and tend to ridicule her political ambitions, which, in their (biased) view, were too high for a mere salon hostess, brilliant as she may have been. This dismissive attitude might explain why Staël always seemed second to her famous companion, Benjamin Constant, or as a mere complement to the doctrines of her father. It is no mere coincidence then that we still have no *Cambridge Companion to Madame de Staël*, though there are such volumes dedicated to Rousseau, Burke, Constant, and Tocqueville.

The contrast between Staël's and [Burke's analyses](#) of the French Revolution would make for a fascinating article or book.^[84] The differences between them become obvious once we consider, for example, Staël's endorsement of the same principles of 1789 which Burke flatly rejected, or her insistence (in the first chapter of the *Considerations*) that the Revolution of 1789 in France and the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89 in England belonged to the same wave of history and were equally legitimate.

Yet there were also important similarities between the two thinkers that must not be overlooked. Consider, for example, their common condemnation of the Terror. In this regard, Staël shared to a considerable extent Burke's critique of fanaticism while avoiding sounding Burkean. In Burke's view, the concept was linked to the revolutionary fervor of those who rejected prudence and embraced a utopian form of social engineering. Staël had as little sympathy as the author of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* for the fanaticism of the revolutionary mind. What distinguishes her position from Burke's is that she proposed an enlightened form of enthusiasm as a cure for fanaticism and the excesses of the spirit of party. This may appear surprising to anyone who remembers the close association between fanaticism, superstition, and enthusiasm in 18th-century political thought. But as I have already argued, it was consistent with Staël's general theory of passions and political moderation, which I hope we will continue to discuss in this forum.

Equally interesting, as Benjamin Hoffmann suggests, is the contrast between Staël's and Voltaire's proposals for combatting fanaticism. The author of *Considerations* chose a solution—enthusiasm—that Voltaire unambiguously rejected. The latter was deeply skeptical of enthusiasm and instead placed his faith in the power of philosophy to dispel superstition. The intellectual dialogue on fanaticism between Staël and Voltaire would deserve an entire article. I can only remark here that for Hoffmann, Staël's proposed remedy for fanaticism holds more promise to ease political passions than Voltaire's confidence in the power of reason. The appeal of Staël's position is also discussed by Vincent, who points out that she emphasized those sentiments that grow from identification with the plight of others and allow us to see our mutual interconnectedness. Hoffmann and Vincent both may be right, especially when one looks around and sees various forms of fanaticism spreading and threatening to tear us apart and isolate us in bubbles and echo chambers. It is in this regard that Madame de Staël remains, to quote Catriona Seth, "a woman for our times," who reminds us of the importance of generosity, pity, and compassion for others, three essential virtues that our world badly needs today.

Endnotes

[79.] Laurent Theis, "Présentation," in *Madame de Staël, La Passion de la liberté*, ed. Laurent Theis (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2017), p. 299.

[80.] Staël's admirers applauded her defense of the principles of 1789 and agreed with her critique of the Terror of 1793-94 and Napoleon. They endorsed her liberal agenda for political reform and shared her strong appreciation for the English political system. For a comprehensive account of the posterity of Staël's *Considerations*, see Stéphanie Tribouillard, *Le Tombeau de Madame de Staël: Les discours de la postérité staëlienne (1817-1850)* (Geneva: Slatkine, 2007).

[81.] Duchess d'Abrantès, *Les Salons de Paris* (Paris: Balland, 1984), p. 69. Also see the chapter dedicated to Staël in Mona Ozouf, *Women's Words: An Essay on French Singularity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 64-87.

[82.] On the singularity of French "feminism," see Ozouf, *Women's Words*, pp. 229-84. It is worth noting that Ozouf's excellent book, which was widely commented on in France, was poorly received in the United States, where it was never released in paperback.

[83.] *La Passion de la liberté* has over 1,000 pages and

includes four major books: *De l'Influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations*, *Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution et des principes qui doivent fonder la république*, *Considérations*, and *Dix Années d'exil*. A full edition of Staël's political works, including *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine*, *Réflexions sur la paix, adressées à M. Pitt et aux Français*, *Réflexions sur la paix intérieure*, *Idées sur une déclaration de droits*, and *Fragment sur le droit d'initiative*, can be found in Madame de Staël, *Œuvres Complètes, Serie III: Œuvres historiques, Tome I, Des circonstances actuelles et autres essais politiques sous la Révolution*, ed. Lucia Omacini (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2009).

[84.] The same could be said about her account and Tocqueville's. See Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France* available online at <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/656>> and <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/660>>. And also Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856) <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2419>>.

2. Benjamin Hoffmann, "A Thought Experiment: On the Political Use of Enthusiasm" [Posted: March 12, 2019]↩

Reading a previous article authored by Aurelian Craiutu (on Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*), I was struck by a passage where he suggested the following "thought experiment":

Suppose that Tocqueville were to submit *Democracy in America* as a doctoral dissertation to the faculty of a political science department at a top research university. Would those of our colleagues who stress the importance of statistical and quantitative skills be willing to give him a pass, given his imprecise use of the concept of democracy, his unique style of explanation that made him prone to contradict himself, and his many omissions (political parties, industrial revolution, etc.) from his analysis?[85]

I found Craiutu's suggestion not only quite entertaining but extremely stimulating as a way to question the scientific norms governing present-day academia while underlining some problematic confusions in Tocqueville's *magnum opus* (in particular: the various and partially conflicting meanings he gave to his key concept *democracy*). In my turn, I would like to suggest a comparable thought experiment, this time on the question of "enthusiasm" as defined by Germaine de Staël. Craiutu observed in his response that we all agree that Staël's political thought has been unduly neglected in the recent past (especially in the United States) and that we also agree on the relevance of her work for our divided time, a work that reminds us of several virtues (generosity, pity, compassion) and that could certainly play a preeminent role in today's contentious political discourse. Let's see if Staël's concept of enthusiasm could *actually* be applied to assuage some of the divisions currently tearing apart the very fabric of American society, a society where, without a doubt, political passions are burning and opinions are polarized to the extreme.[86] It could be a sort of practical test to question our shared hypothesis on the relevance of Staël's political work for our time.

First things first: what did Staël mean by enthusiasm? A key component of this concept is its antinomy to selfishness. Staël

developed this idea in her work *Germany*: "Enthusiasm only can counter-balance the tendency to selfishness, and this is with the help of this divine sign that we must recognize immortal creatures."^[87] Whereas the direct consequence of a person's selfish reasoning is valuing only what serves her best interest (for example: "health," "money," and "power"^[88]), enthusiasm lifts us above the pettiness of these self-serving goals and drives us to "sacrifice our well-being or our own life"^[89] Another dimension of Staël's conception of enthusiasm deserves to be underlined: its distinctly aristocratic undertone. Indeed, Staël constantly opposed selfishness to enthusiasm while insisting on the vile nature of the former. Staël associated striving for one's own success with "vulgarity," "indignity," "and degradation."^[90] She had no qualms about chastising "selfishness's vulgar ascendancy."^[91] However, she did not merely allude to the aristocratic nature of enthusiasm by comparing it to the plebeian stigma attached to selfishness. Thanks to a network of metaphors, she also underlined how the experience of enthusiasm revealed the very best in each of us, a noble nature that can be awakened at all times. Thus, a person experiencing enthusiasm will feel "a noble quaking," and her heart will beat for "high feelings."^[92] In other words, enthusiasm is not a passion but rather "a disposition of the soul":^[93] and this disposition is not conditioned by an aristocratic origin but by the occasional manifestation of individuals' noblest penchants.

Indeed, while being associated with nobility, enthusiasm is not the preserve of the aristocratic class. In her *Considerations*, Staël mentioned several instances of "popular enthusiasm"^[94] and described a scene at the outset of the Revolution when a large crowd was animated by a "true and upright enthusiasm."^[95] This is an important detail as it reveals that the above-mentioned "disposition of the soul" does not come with birth and a special upbringing but can, ultimately, be manifested by anyone under special circumstances.

Now that we have a clearer idea of what enthusiasm is, according to Staël, how can we use this concept to fight the animosity of political fanaticism? In his lead essay, Aurelian Craiutu reminded us of the therapeutic role played by enthusiasm, according to Staël, in times of political unrest. But how do you inspire people to follow the inspirations coming from the best part of themselves? If enthusiasm is the opposite of selfishness, how can we encourage such attitudes as self-sacrifice and generosity in a society where the pursuit of one's personal success is intertwined with the very concept of *Americanness*, a society obsessed with performance and the attainment of personal, ultimately selfish goals, a society where the betterment of each individual trumps the collective effort to bring social change? I would be curious to hear my colleagues' views on the following question: what would be a concrete, practical use of Staël's concept of enthusiasm to calm the political passions of our time? No doubt that these very divided United States could be a good place to undertake the cure – assuming it does exist.

Endnotes

^[85.] Aurelian Craiutu, "Tocqueville's New Science of Politics Revisited," May 2014, Liberty Matters Forum, <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/tocqueville-s-new-science-of-politics>>.

^[86.] On the growing gap between liberals and conservatives in the United States, see the numerous studies published by the Pew Research Center: "Political Polarization" <<http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/political-polarization/>>.

^[87.] Staël, *De l'Allemagne* (1810) (Paris: Librairie Stéréotype, 1814), 3: 383. All translations are mine.

^[88.] Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, 3: 383

^[89.] Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, 3: 383.

^[90.] See Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, 3: 383 and 387.

^[91.] Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, 3: 387.

^[92.] Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, 3: 384.

^[93.] Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, 3: 387.

^[94.] Germaine de Staël, *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution, newly revised translation of the 1818 English edition*, edited, with an introduction and notes by Aurelian Craiutu (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2008), p. 126. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2212#Stael_1459_331>.

^[95.] Germaine de Staël, *Considerations*, p. 157. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2212#Stael_1459_390>.

3. Catriona Seth, "A Cosmopolitan in Life and Works" [Posted: March 14, 2019]↩

As has already been mentioned by Benjamin Hoffmann and Aurelian Craiutu, enthusiasm is a positive force for Staël in many fields. I would like to look at something which is often associated with her treatment of enthusiasm. One of the core values in Staël's approach to combatting the spirit of party and which nobody has yet mentioned is, I think, her cosmopolitanism. Let me explain what I mean. Staël was in many ways a "natural" cosmopolitan, if there is such a thing: she was born in Paris to Swiss Protestant parents. Her mother was of French Huguenot heritage; her paternal grandfather was born in Brandenburg (then an electorate, now part of Poland). During her childhood in the family's "salon," she had occasion to meet a wide variety of visitors, including most of France's leading thinkers, but also many foreigners. She traveled to England as a child, and her father purchased a château by the shores of Lake Geneva where they spent time. During her years of exile after the Revolution, Staël brought together European intellectuals in this château, Coppet, which came to represent what Stendhal referred to as "the Estates General of European opinion."^[96] She also spent time in various European countries, including Italy, Sweden, current-day Germany, Russia, England, etc. As a writer, too, Staël showed her openness to foreign cultures. In *On Literature* (1800), she defended the idea of distinct Northern and Southern aesthetics as well as political traditions and showed her preference at once for Ossian and melancholy poetry and for parliamentary regimes. In *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807), she penned a tragic sentimental tale which is also a reflection on the future of Europe and how Italy—then a set of fragmented little States—could, through culture and a common sense of history, become a great nation once again. Staël's major essay, *De l'Allemagne (On Germany)* was only finally published in 1813: Napoleon's police had seized the proofs and tried to stop it from coming out. The official reason subsequently given was edifying as the author recounts: "*mon ouvrage n'étoit pas françois*" ("My work was not French.").^[97] With its wide-ranging discussion of German society and culture, the book showed that language and culture can provide foundations for national unity, and it invited the French to take interest in intellectual and literary trends across the Rhine. It did a lot to raise interest in Kantian philosophy and the whole of the Romantic movement.

At a time when Napoleon was seeking to impose a one-size-fits-all approach to politics, Staël was pleading for individual differences and openness to other traditions. She saw difference as an opportunity to learn from others rather than to charge in and overturn centuries of tradition. For her, encounters with foreigners were not to be considered as threats one might have to forfeit anything, but rather as guarantees of gain. This is possibly best summed up in something she wrote in "On Germany":

"Nul homme, autant supérieur qu'il soit, ne peut deviner ce qu'il se développe naturellement dans l'esprit de celui qui vit sur un autre sol et respire un autre air. On se trouvera donc bien en tout pays, d'accueillir des pensées étrangères car dans ce genre, l'hospitalité fait la fortune de celui qui reçoit."[\[98\]](#)

"No man, however superior, can guess what develops naturally in the mind of one who lives on a different soil and breathes in a different air. As a result, in any country, one would do well to welcome foreign thoughts for, in this area, hospitality makes the fortune of he who receives."

Surely that is a thought for our time. Getting our contemporaries to take this on board and act upon the consequences of such an idea would doubtless be a step in the right direction if we are to hope to further the greater common good.

Endnotes

[\[96.\]](#) Stendhal, *Rome, Naples et Florence* (Paris, 1817), p. 327-28.

[\[97.\]](#) Staël, Préface, *De l'Allemagne, Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Treuttel et Würtz, 1820), vol. X, p. 13.

[\[98.\]](#) Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, vol. XI, p. 145.

4. Aurelian Craiutu, "The Many Windows of the World" [\[Posted: March 14, 2019\]](#)

Benjamin Hoffmann asks an interesting question: assuming we have a clearer idea of what enthusiasm is in Madame Staël's view, how can we use this concept to fight the animosity of political fanaticism? I am not sure I have a good answer to this question. For the moment I'd like to return to what Staël regarded as the core of fanaticism before we try to solve the puzzle. I use the word *puzzle* on purpose because like Professor Hoffmann, I am intrigued that Staël proposed enthusiasm as a cure for fanaticism.

In her opinion, fanaticism consists in the attempt to derive everything from a single idea. (Morality, she notes, is the only single idea that seems innocuous[\[99\]](#)). Those who fall prey to fanaticism discredit every cause or principle by drawing extreme consequences from what at the outset may very well be a valid idea or value. Thus, there are fanatics of reason, liberty, equality, and inequality, but also of justice, duty, virtue, property, nation, and noninterference. In turn, each group can be divided into various subgroups and nuances. They all use litmus tests to distinguish between the pure and impure ones, the worthy and unworthy ones. And they all dislike compromise. Their basic idea is that no good principle or value may ever be the object of a reasonable compromise with other values and principles.

This is what Isaiah Berlin understood by the danger of monism. It has to do with the temptation to reduce the diversity of the world to one dimension and judge everything else in light of it. This tendency becomes dangerous and is pregnant with significant political implications when we assess the legitimacy of institutions and evaluate proposals for reforming them. In this regard, fanatics of all stripes prove to be intransigent and unmoved by any criticism or debate; they know the answers before any questions are asked. To give just a few examples, for some who believe that Marx had all the answers to our political questions, capitalism is vicious and inhuman simply because it engenders inequality. All millionaires or billionaires, without exception, are evil. Private property is theft, and Wall Street must be occupied. For those who endorse an originalist interpretation of the U.S. Constitution, any attempt to question the idea of retrieving the original intention of the Founding Fathers is declared a nonstarter. For still others, any attempt to increase taxes is a sign of socialism. The list goes on and on.

Madame de Staël opposed this intransigent approach. No social or political question can be decided, she believed, except by trying to find a judicious balance between the pluses and minuses of all proposed solutions. All we can do is balance inconveniences, compare, and calculate. There is no absolute good on earth, pure and untainted by the imperfection of our realm.[\[100\]](#) That is why, for moderates like Staël (and Berlin), the world can and should never be seen through any single window. Such a unique window is only a figment of the imagination. Our social, political, and personal lives presuppose a permanent tension and confrontation among different ideas and principles. Our task is to try, as best as we can, to find a decent balance among them. Any absolute idea or principle is simply an impossibility, a utopian and costly dream.

To conclude, in response to Professor Hoffmann's question, I am prepared to make the following suggestion. It is no accident that Madame de Staël makes an *éloge* of enthusiasm in the concluding section of the second volume of *De l'Allemagne*. Her book was criticized by Napoleon and his followers for not being French. They judged her work from a narrow perspective according to which it was unacceptable that a French liberal would go to such lengths to praise the culture and institutions of a rival country. Staël saw no contradiction in this approach. For her, enthusiasm was a form of openness toward the world, combined with an appreciation for the plurality of cultures, institutions, mores, and customs. Such an openness was supposed to foster an ecumenical spirit combining a genuine appreciation for the universal with a recognition of national differences. Far from being a shallow form of cosmopolitanism, it is a fruitful and thoughtful way to overcome our selfishness and narrowness. When we manage to do that, we are freed from the obsession with any single idea, principle, or nation. Understood in this light, enthusiasm gives us a chance to be re-enchanted by the beauty of the world around us. It opens for us many windows through which we can contemplate its richness and diversity.

Endnotes

[\[99.\]](#) "La morale est la seule idée unique sans danger," (*Des Circonstances actuelles*, p. 255).

[\[100.\]](#) See *Des Circonstances actuelles*, pp. 48-49.

5. K. Steven Vincent, "Arenas for the Cultivation of Sociability and "Enthusiasm"" [\[Posted: March 19, 2019\]](#)

I would like to pick up a thread of the conversation suggested by Benjamin Hoffmann, namely, the aristocratic undertone of Staël's discussion of "enthusiasm" and the contrast with plebian "selfishness." Staël did not argue, of course, that enthusiasm and the other positive sentiments were restricted to the aristocratic class. Rather, she fervently hoped that these "dispositions of the soul" would spread broadly in society to counter selfish passions and "fanaticism." Nonetheless, this undertone points to an element of Staël's position that poses an important question concerning any potential application of her political thought today.

Staël assumed that certain arenas of sociability were more likely to encourage enthusiasm and other positive sentiments than others. The most favored locations for her were, I believe, salons, especially salons of the late-Old Regime and early years of the Revolution. For Staël, these were the model locations for the gathering of people who might disagree about political, scientific, and aesthetic issues, but who related to each other without rancor or physical conflict. They were the *locus classicus* of an open communication of ideas, where an intelligent elite could discuss and mediate their differences. In a notable passage in *Considérations sur la Révolution française*, she wrote:

[Foreigners are not able to conceive the charm and brilliance of Parisian society](#), if they have not seen France twenty years ago. One is able to say with truth that never has a society been at the same time as brilliant and serious as during the three or four first years of the revolution, running from 1788 to the end of 1791. As public affairs were still in the hands of the best people, all vigor, liberty, and grace of the old politesse, were united in the same individuals.[\[101\]](#)

There is a sense of nostalgic affection here, I believe, one that comes from Staël's perception that the world in which these salons existed had disappeared. She pointed out that under Napoleon, salons had been largely replaced by grand official ceremonies that were intellectually deadening. Even the salons that remained, she observed, had become venues where suspicion, careerism, and venal passions prevailed. As she put it in a letter to Benjamin Constant, high society had become "a labyrinth of interests and ambitions."[\[102\]](#) She was worried that the refined sociability and reasoned deliberation that salons represented were gone, replaced by official ceremonies, bad manners, vulgarity, and fanaticism.

Bronislaw Baczkó has argued that, for Staël, the salon was a utopian space where aesthetics and politics made a perfect mix.[\[103\]](#) It was the arena where she imagined it was possible to detach the urbanity, good taste, and sociability – that is, the *moeurs* – of the Old Regime and transfer them to the republican postrevolutionary era. In short, it was the privileged location for a melding of republican politics and aristocratic culture.

With their decline, the question becomes (to return to the thought experiment suggested by Benjamin Hoffmann): "Where in modern society can such positive sentiments be nourished?" Catriona Seth has suggested that, for Staël, one answer was to encourage cosmopolitanism. This is persuasive, and it would clearly help. I am not convinced, however, that this would be sufficient to overcome the political rancor and xenophobic nationalism of our own era. (Nor was it sufficient in Staël's own era.)

When I contemplate potential answers, my mind wanders to Tocqueville's view of the importance of local politics, of associations, of judicial traditions (the jury system in America, for example). And I think of Durkheim's focus on the social solidarity created by professional groups, though I do not believe (as he did)

that these groups would be any more unselfish than traditional groups. What Staël and Tocqueville shared was a belief that an important part of the answer was the arena of modern representative politics, where the give-and-take of incommensurable interests could take place in a manner that could lead to compromise. What they also shared, however, was an inattentiveness to dimensions that, in my opinion, are of equal importance: the issue of "class," the problems created by extreme economic inequality. Perhaps the privileged backgrounds of French liberals like Staël and Tocqueville made them insensitive to such issues. This might be the most important "aristocratic undertone" of their thought.

Endnotes

[\[101.\]](#) Germaine de Staël, *Considérations sur la Révolution Françaises*, seconde partie, chapitre XVII (Paris: Charpentier, 1862), t. 1, p. 299.

[\[102.\]](#) Germaine de Staël to Benjamin Constant (27 October 1815), cited by Steven Kale, *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 100.

[\[103.\]](#) Bronislaw Baczkó, *Politiques de la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).

6. Catriona Seth, "Crimes in the Name of Liberty" [Posted: March 19, 2019][↩](#)

Since two of us (K. Steven Vincent and I) mentioned the importance of the *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine* as a founding text in Staël's political writings, I would like to add a couple of thoughts about it. It seems to me that it is an instance of her attempting to claim a role for those who were not yet known as "intellectuals" in public life. It further demonstrates her belief, which is also present, for instance, in the second half of her great essay on literature, *De la littérature* (1800), that texts have potential agency in politics. The failure of her brochure and the queen's execution were both indicators of the attacks on liberty by the revolutionary regime. This was particularly unbearable for Staël since the early stages of the Revolution had seemed to bring the promise of liberty—as the French national motto *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* continues to proclaim.

On November 25, 1793, Staël wrote to the Dutch-Swiss author Isabelle de Charrière:

Quel sort cependant est réservé aux premiers amis de la liberté en France ! en relation presque avec tous, chaque jour j'éprouve une nouvelle peine.[\[104\]](#)

Yet what fate is reserved to the first friends of liberty in France! For nearly all of them I feel a new sadness every day.

A couple of months later, on January 26, 1794, she sent the Swiss scientist Lavater, who had asked for it, a copy of her *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine*. She drew a direct link between the queen's execution and the perverse attitude of the regime to liberty:

Aucun acte réunît autant de caractères de barbarie que le long supplice de cette malheureuse victime. Ah ! Que d'horreurs commises au nom de la plus sainte

des idées, de la liberté, et quelle notion certaine peut-il rester du juste et de l'injuste quand on a pris soin de les confondre avec tant d'art ? Je reviens sans cesse à cette France : je l'ai tant aimée^[105]

No action unites so many barbarous characters as the long torture of this unhappy victim. Ah! How many horrific acts have been committed in the name of the holiest of ideas, that of liberty, and what secure notion of the just and the unjust can remain when one has taken care to confuse them so artfully? I return time and time again to France which I have loved so much.

The gratuitousness of the queen's execution after a summary trial came, for Staël and for many others, to offer a paradigmatic expression of the way in which people who had claimed to be acting for freedom had in fact betrayed this central value. She was particularly conscious of the way in which words are often cynically bandied about by politicians to unite people. This is an invitation to us to analyze discourse and to be wary of grandiloquence when it is empty discourse

Endnotes

^[104.] *Correspondance générale*, ed. Beatrice Fink (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1960), vol. II, p. 507.

^[105.] *Ibid.*, p. 559. The comment is reminiscent of Jeanne-Marie Roland's supposed last words before she was executed: "Oh, Liberty! What crimes are committed in your name!"

7. Benjamin Hoffmann, "Against Machiavelli: The Question of Selfishness" [Posted: March 19, 2019]↩

I am grateful to Professor Craiutu for his answer to the "thought experiment" I suggested earlier this month. By linking the concept *enthusiasm* to Staël's cosmopolitanism, both Aurelian Craiutu and Catriona Seth have made a convincing point: welcoming the variety of beliefs and opinions that prevail around the world gives us a better chance of avoiding the frightening excesses of political fanaticism. Although the point I am about to make will probably sound somewhat trivial to my distinguished colleagues – who, without a doubt, long ago adopted Staël's cosmopolitanism, open-mindedness, and distaste for one-size-fits-all solutions to complex intellectual problems – it appears that Staël's lesson is indeed relevant for our time, especially in the United States where the staggering disappearance of language programs from numerous universities across the nation is hindering the diffusion of what Craiutu calls the "openness toward the world, combined with an appreciation for the plurality of cultures, institutions, mores, and customs." Each of these closings contribute to the intellectual impoverishment of the wealthiest nation in the world by reducing the available cultural currency.^[106]

In two successive posts, I would like to explore a little more what Aurelian Craiutu suggested regarding Staël's refusal of a form of intellectual reductionism that adopts a single concept as the touchstone to judge principles, actions, and individuals. More precisely, I would like to underline her refusal of Machiavellianism. *The Prince* (1532) has diffused a forceful, yet highly problematic definition of politics as the art of gaining and maintaining power without any regard for the immorality of the means employed to achieve those two ends. This form of extreme

pragmatism – the value of any political decision derives from its capacity to help the acquisition and conservation of power – holds all the warning signs of *monism* (a term I am using after Professor Craiutu borrowed it from Isaiah Berlin). In his last post, Aurelian Craiutu indeed underlined that Staël conceived fanaticism as an attempt to derive everything from one idea – whether it be liberty, equality, inequality, duty, virtue, property, nation, or noninterference. The idea of *efficiency* can be added to this list and the name Machiavelli to those of Marx, Adam Smith, and the Founding Fathers, whom other *monists* have heralded in the past or are still invoking today to justify their decisions. "*Timeo hominem unius libri*": "I fear the man of a single book." No doubt Staël would have agreed with this phrase attributed to Saint Thomas Aquinas, as the "man of a single book" may very well become obsessed with a single idea and, to quote Aurelian Craiutu again, "reduce the diversity of the world to one dimension and judge everything else in light of it." In particular, *The Prince* would have never become Staël's personal book of reference because of its clear antinomy with her concept *enthusiasm* and the values that underpin it. Two reasons can explain Staël's stance regarding Machiavelli's *magnum opus*: first, this work deconstructs the equivalence between *selfishness* and *evil* that Plato established in *The Republic* through the dialogue between Socrates and Thrasymachus; second, Staël identified Machiavelli's political thought as a clear influence on Napoleon's style of government.

Previous posts have already explored the concept *enthusiasm* in Staël's political thinking and, in particular, insisted that one of the main characteristics of this "disposition of the soul" consists in encouraging individuals to sacrifice their personal interests for the greater good. Far from seeing the sacrifice of one's life as a grandiose gift, *The Prince* asserted that the preservation of one's life is a priority: "for Machiavelli what is politically virtuous will first of all answer to the needs of security, stability, duration."^[107] Indeed, Machiavelli's work is deprived of any sort of idealism: it aspires to describe mankind and politics as they truly are rather than as they ought to be. Starting with a pessimistic understanding of human nature which involves the certainty that appetites are aggressive and untamable and that people are fundamentally evil (which is an obvious common point with the Christian dogma of original sin), Machiavelli saw morality as "enlightened self-interest" and society as a "relatively safe arena of selfishness."^[108] These definitions are diametrically opposite to Staël's conception of enthusiasm as the cure for political fanaticism and the best way to defeat selfish, vulgar penchants.

Endnotes

^[106.] On this question, see the following article by Steve Johnson, "Colleges Lose a 'Stunning' 651 Foreign-Language Programs in 3 Years," <<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Colleges-Lose-a-Stunning-/245526>>.

^[107.] Asher Horowitz, "Machiavelli, Political Morality and an 'Economy of Violence,'" <http://www.yorku.ca/horowitz/courses/lectures/19_machiavelli_economy_violence.html>.

^[108.] Horowitz.

8. Benjamin Hoffmann, "Against Machiavelli: *The Prince*, a Political Manual for Bonaparte" [Posted: March 21, 2019]↩

Besides the question of selfishness, Staël's anti-Machiavellianism has at least a second source: she saw *The Prince* as a political manual followed by Napoléon Bonaparte. This idea is particularly developed in chapter XVIII of the *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution*, "On the Political Doctrine of Bonaparte." Indeed, she accused the emperor of being "[intoxicated with the vile draught of Machiavellism](#)" while comparing him with the "[Italian tyrants of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries](#)."^[109] It is worth quoting the following paragraph where she particularly developed Machiavelli's influence on Bonaparte's conception of the aim of politics:

[I am inclined to think that Machiavelli](#), detesting above everything the yoke of foreigners in Italy, tolerated, and even encouraged, the means, whatever they were, which the princes of the country could employ in order to be masters, hoping that they would one day be powerful enough to repulse the German and French troops. Machiavelli analyzes the art of war in his writings like a military man; he reverts continually to the necessity of a military organization entirely national; and if he sullied his reputation by his indulgence for the crimes of the Borgias, it was perhaps because he felt too strongly the desire of attempting every means of recovering the independence of his country. Bonaparte did not certainly examine the *Prince* of Machiavelli in this point of view; but he sought there what still passes for profound wisdom with vulgar minds, the art of deceiving mankind. This policy must fall in proportion to the extension of knowledge, as the belief in witchcraft has fallen since the true laws of natural philosophy have been discovered.^[110]

Admittedly, it remains possible to underline certain similarities between ideas held by Staël and Machiavelli, especially if we consider the question of political acumen. As Professor Craiutu puts it: "No social or political question can be decided, [Staël] believed, except by trying to find a judicious *balance* between the pluses and minuses of all proposed solutions. All we can do is *balance* inconveniences, compare, and calculate." (My emphasis.) No doubt Machiavelli would have agreed that politics is the art of calculating the pros and cons and finding the least bad solution to a given problem. However, there remains between them a fundamental divergence on what good and evil consist of, or, in other words, on the nature of the criterion standing at the center of their respective "balance." For Machiavelli, humans are selfishly aggressive and the political game necessarily entails that a player's victory happens at the expense of an opponent's loss. Staël, on the contrary, looked for a way of encouraging people to rise above their self-interest, express their intrinsic noble nature, and understand that a feeling of mutual responsibility should blossom from their fundamental interconnectedness. Enthusiasm is her solution to that problem, and it could not be further from Machiavelli's casual acceptance of selfishness.

Endnotes

^[109.] Germaine de Staël, *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution*, newly revised translation of the 1818 English edition, ed. with an introduction and notes by Aurelian Craiutu (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2008), p. 517.

^[110.] Germaine de Staël, *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution*, p. 517.

9. Aurelian Craiutu, "The Cosmopolitanism of the Coppet Group" [Posted: March 21, 2019]↔

In her previous comment, Catriona Seth mentioned a key trait of Madame de Staël's Weltanschauung that deserves further consideration: her cosmopolitanism. This was indeed the defining character of the so-called Coppet group to which she and her friends belonged.^[111] This was a genuine island of freedom and civility, whose refinement evoked that *douceur de vivre* which we tend to associate with the Old Regime. It was a small universe in which philosophers and writers were welcome and played a key role.

But who were the other members of Coppet beside Madame de Staël and her father, Jacques Necker? The list of those who came to this place is a who's who of European intelligentsia at that time: [Benjamin Constant](#), Prosper de Barante, the Schlegel brothers, Mathieu de Montmorency, Sismonde de Sismondi, Friedrich Tieck, and Charles-Victor de Bonstetten, as well as a host of distinguished Russian visitors. The Coppet group was already active in 1798, even though its golden days were from 1804 (when Necker died) to roughly 1810. Literature was eventually replaced by politics, which eventually became the most prominent subject of conversation at Coppet. After Madame de Staël's death on July 14, 1817, Coppet became a true *lieu de mémoire*, a place of memory, where distinguished visitors subsequently came to pay homage to the genius of the hostess and her mother and father.

The famous French literary critic Sainte-Beuve went so far as to call the Coppet group "the Elysée intellectual of an entire generation," the Romantic generation. More importantly, the Coppet group constituted an island of freedom and moderation in the middle of an oppressed and unfree Europe. Its geographical position was significant. Located in Switzerland— "*un singulier pays, on y parle français, on y pense à l'anglaise*" ("a singular country, where people speak French and think like the English"), as Schlegel once said— Coppet evolved into a vibrant center of opposition to Napoleon. Nonetheless, the circle around Madame de Staël was much more than a mere opposition group. Situated at the intersection of three cultures, Coppet was above all a cosmopolitan place where a spirit of openness and inquisitiveness dominated. At Coppet, the doors were open all the time and the guests were literally subjected to relentless and intense socialization. In-depth discussions of literary works (from Calderon, Goethe, and Sophocles to Sappho, Racine, and Shakespeare) were punctuated by moments of (savvy) political gossip. The theater had a special place at Coppet; every month two new plays were staged there. The guests of Madame de Staël were also allowed to enjoy private reading and writing time, and often they went out on long walks around the chateau. The beauty of nature (most notably the glacier at Chamonix) and the cultural riches of Geneva were additional attractions.

Not surprisingly, those who returned from Coppet were overwhelmed by the cultural riches lavished upon them there. After spending a few days in the company of Madame de Staël and her friends in 1804, Bonstetten confessed to a friend upon returning home that he was exhausted from too much socialization and intellectual exchange. The unique creativity of the place was confirmed by another guest (Voght). Everyone present at Coppet was doing something, he wrote. There was always something exciting going on. Everyone there was doing something, he wrote. As someone was writing an essay on Germany, others were talking about a play or an opera, while a few others were discussing philosophy and politics. Madame de Staël's works

reflect and bear the cosmopolitan imprint of the Coppet group.

Endnotes

[111.] Editor's Note: There is in Paris an *Institut Coppet* which states as its mission: "la mission est de participer, par un travail pédagogique, éducatif, culturel et intellectuel, à la renaissance et à la réhabilitation de l'école française d'économie politique, et à la promotion des différentes écoles de pensée favorables aux valeurs de liberté, de propriété, de responsabilité et de libre marché." Website: <<https://www.institutcoppet.org>>.

10. K. Steven Vincent, "The Importance of Constitutions and Political Institutions" [Posted: March 21, 2019]↩

Thus far, our discussion has focused primarily on Germaine de Staël's analysis of *moeurs*, of the sentiments and dispositions that she believed were critical if France was to weather the storm of the Revolution and to become a stable regime. This has led to a productive consideration of central dimensions of her political stance: her fear of "fanaticism;" her belief that pity, generosity, and "enthusiasm" were important sentiments; her desire to embrace a cosmopolitan orientation; and her distance from Machiavellian politics. I'd like to add another element to the mix: the importance of political and juridical institutions and of the constitutions that could provide the framework for their instantiation and survival.

Like her father, Jacques Necker, and like her lover during the 1790s, Benjamin Constant, Staël favored a constitutional regime that protected civil liberties and provided a space where political differences and divergent interests could be debated and, hopefully, compromised. One of the constitutions that were of special concern to her was the constitution that created the Directory Government (1795-1799). This constitution was debated in the Convention during the summer of 1795, accepted by this body on August 22, approved in a national plebiscite in September, and put into effect on October 26. This 1795 constitution retained the fundamental features of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and of the Constitution of 1791: protection of civil liberties, popular sovereignty, political authority exercised by elected officials, an independent judiciary, rule by law, and the sanctity of property. It also was designed to avoid the danger of dictatorship by one committee or one institution. (The memory of the power of the Committee of Public Safety during the Terror was strong among the "Thermidorians" who wrote the Constitution.) Staël and her father were unhappy that the Constitution lacked provisions for more coordination of, and checks between, the executive and legislative bodies – that is, they wanted more provisions for a "balance of power."^[112] Nonetheless, she was generally supportive, relieved that an institution as radical as the Convention had pushed through such a reasonable constitution. France, she believed, was moving in the right direction. This was true even though she was forced into exile at this time due to her close association with former nobles and *émigrés*.

Juridical and constitutional issues remained important for Staël. These were the years when she and Constant were connected romantically and intellectually. Constant was working on a manuscript, unpublished until 1991, now entitled *Fragments d'un ouvrage abandonné sur la possibilité d'une constitution républicaine dans un grand pays*.^[113] At the same time, Staël

was working on a manuscript, which would also be unpublished at the time, entitled *Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution et qui doivent fonder la République en France*.^[114] Both works were centrally concerned with constitutional issues, and both have been viewed by scholars as essentially joint projects. The point to emphasize is that both were concerned with more than human character, *sensibilité*, and *moeurs*; they also focused on the constitutional-institutional framework essential for a liberal society.

Given the state of American politics, it is perhaps not surprising that our own conversation has focused primarily on culture – the lamentable decline of civil discourse, the need to encourage generous "dispositions of the soul." However essential this is, though, it is important to restate the obvious: namely, that a successful liberal order also requires appropriate institutional structures. In Staël's era, liberals were facing crises on both fronts – institutional and cultural – and the instabilities created by the torrent of the French Revolution culminated in the rise to power of a tyrant, Napoleon. We can only hope that, in the United States, as civility declines, the legal and constitutional institutions will prove sufficiently robust to resist such an outcome.

Endnotes

[112.] At the time, there was a vigorous debate concerning the details of the Constitution of 1795, a debate that has continued in subsequent scholarship. For a review of this debate, see: *1795: Pour une République sans Révolution*, sous la direction de Roger Dupuy et Marcel Morabito (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1996); and, *Constitution de l'an III: Boissy d'Anglas et la naissance du libéralisme constitutionnel*, sous la direction de Gerard Conac et Jean-Pierre Machelon (Paris: PUF, 1999).

[113.] Benjamin Constant, *Fragments d'un ouvrage abandonné sur la possibilité d'une constitution républicaine dans un grand pays*, edited by Henri Grange (Paris: Aubier, 1991). Composed mostly between 1798 and 1803 (when Constant and Staël were together), and finished in 1807 or 1808, it was unpublished until 1991.

[114.] Madame de Staël, *Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution et qui doivent fonder la République en France*, ed. Lucia Omacini (Genève: Droz, 1979).

11. Aurelian Craiutu, "Madame de Staël on the Liberty of the Moderns" [Posted: March 25, 2019]↩

In his latest comment, Steven Vincent mentioned that juridical and constitutional issues remained important for Madame de Staël throughout her entire career. This is a significant point worth highlighting in our conversation. Even if she was arguably less interested (and precise) than Constant in analyzing the concrete mechanisms of representative government, it is important to remember that beginning with the Directory, Staël offered a vigorous defense of what came to be known later as the liberty of the moderns. Today we associate this term with Constant's famous essay from 1819 on the liberty of the moderns compared to the liberty of the ancients.^[115] Yet the distinction had appeared for the first time in Staël's writings, two decades earlier. This detail is often neglected by political theorists, and it is time to set the record straight.

To this effect, we should turn our attention to Staël's *Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution et qui*

doivent fonder la République en France (1798), "one of the most representative texts of republican constitutionalism"^[116] ever written. It is no mere coincidence that at about the time she was working on this manuscript, two of her closest friends were drafting their own manuscripts addressing similar questions regarding the constitutional and political means for "ending" the French Revolution. Sismondi started drafting his *Recherches sur les constitutions des peuples libres* in 1797, a manuscript which he completed four years later but which remained unpublished.^[117] In turn, Constant examined the possibility of creating a republic in a large state in *Fragments d'un ouvrage abandonné* (1802). We know that Staël, Sismondi, and Constant commented on each other's drafts and borrowed freely from each other's ideas. A few years later, Constant drafted the first version of his most important political work, *Principles of Politics* (1806),^[118] by revisiting many of the ideas of Staël and Sismondi.

The importance and value of *Des circonstances actuelles* can hardly be overestimated. In that manuscript Staël argued that "[t]he liberty of present times consists of everything that guarantees the independence of citizens against the power of the government."^[119] In modern societies, she wrote, citizens are allowed to freely pursue their self-interest, while in ancient republics, the emphasis was on civic virtue and direct political participation. Ancient citizens were asked to sacrifice their individual interests for the sake of their communities. Such a demand, Staël argued, ceases to be legitimate in the context of modern society, in which it is no longer possible to expect citizens to spontaneously identify themselves with a putative common good. On the contrary, modern individuals ought to be allowed to pursue their own private interests as they think fit. Therefore laws and institutions in modern society should protect property and the private sphere from any form of illegitimate interference from outside.

During the Directory, Staël expressed concern for the low public spiritedness of the French, which she regarded as a corollary of civic apathy engendered by postrevolutionary fatigue and the failure of the Revolution. Understanding and respecting the distinctive nature of modern liberty was, in her view, the only way to end the revolutionary cycle and make representative

institutions work in the aftermath of the Terror. "In order to finish the revolution," she wrote in 1795, "one must find a center and a common link.... This center which we need is property; this link is personal interest."^[120] Staël's language was anything but Rousseauian. Hers was a bold agenda of reform at the heart of which lay the principle of political moderation, the opposite of the spirit of party she denounced in her writings. Two and a half decades later, Constant followed in her footsteps when he made his own case for recognizing the distinctive nature of modern liberty.

Endnotes

^[115.] Benjamin Constant, *The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of Moderns* (Unknown, 1819). <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2251>>.

^[116.] Mauro Barberis, "Constant, Mme de Staël et la constitution républicaine: un essai d'interprétation," in *Le groupe de Coppet et le monde moderne: conceptions-images-débats*, ed. Francoise Tilkin (Geneva: Droz, 1998), p. 193.

^[117.] Sismondi's *Recherches sur les constitutions des peuples libres* were edited and published by Marco Minerbi at Droz (Geneva) in 1965. The published text represents only the last batch of the entire manuscript, which consists of three other parts. The second part was published in Roberta di Reda ed., *Libertà e scienza del governo* in Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi, vol. II: *Essais sur les constitutions des peuples libres* (Rome: Jouvence, 1988).

^[118.] A later and expanded version of this book was published as Benjamin Constant, *Principles of Politics Applicable to all Governments*, trans. Dennis O'Keeffe, ed. Etienne Hofmann, Introduction by Nicholas Capaldi (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003). <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/861>>.

^[119.] *Des Circonstances actuelles*, p. 111.

^[120.] Germaine de Staël, *Œuvres Complètes de Madame la baronne de Staël publiées par son fils* (Paris: Treuttel and Würtz, 1821), vol. I, p. 58.

ADDITIONAL READING

Online Resources ↩

Groups: [19th Century French Liberalism](#)

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