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INTRODUCTION

A Passion for Politics

“L’AVENIR N’A POINT DE PRÉCURSEURS”

Two centuries after her death in 1817, Anne-Louise-Germaine Necker de Staël-Holstein is by no means a forgotten or even a neglected author. Indeed, her personal history is such a good one that her contemporaries, and later her biographers, have narrated it over and over again, now in gossipy, now in admiring tones, insisting on the most salient—dramatic, scandalous, adventurous—anecdotes. It is the story of the banker’s daughter who became one of Europe’s best-connected intellectuals, or, if you prefer, that of an exceptionally talented woman, born to great wealth and privilege, who achieved a degree of public influence to which not even her social advantages would normally have entitled her. At times of great political turmoil, when the lives of so many around her were wrecked or destroyed, she succeeded in carving out an independent path for herself and in making her views heard, first by the powerful men around her, and later by the European public at large.

The story has a very distinguished cast of kings, queens, and emperors, famous generals, politicians, and ministers, as well as great writers and intellectuals. It has elegant settings, with a good selection of *hôtels particuliers*, castles, and royal palaces in Paris, Geneva, Versailles, and, further away, in London, Vienna, Stockholm, and Saint Petersburg. It offers such political intrigue, tangled love affairs, and spectacular reversals of fortune as the

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French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire managed to produce in the span of two decades. The narrative varies slightly according to the preferences and prejudices of whoever is telling it, but on the whole—short of some sensational archival discovery—it is not going to change significantly.¹

So why return to it once again? The main reason is that the reputation Staël enjoys today as a novelist and literary critic, as the archetypal independent writer battling against despotism, is very high; on the other hand, the dimension of her life she cared most about, politics—the theory and practice of the exercise of power—has been set aside by historians as being, if not exactly irrelevant, possibly exhausted as a topic of research and a source of inspiration. Significantly, the bulk of her political writings, some of which were originally published in England as well as in France, are no longer available in English translation.

This decline of interest rests essentially on two grounds. The first is the belief that Staël's political activities were always dictated by personal and emotional motives, and therefore should be treated as a feature of her biography, a dimension in a broader life narrative. Even those historians who are prepared to credit her with genuine political vision tend to fall back on psychological stereotypes as the explanation of her actions: her devotion to her father, her ambitions for her husband or for her lovers, her loyalty to her friends. Naturally personal elements are always relevant in political life: family and professional relations, local affinities or chance encounters, individual sympathies or dislikes—all may play a role. Indeed, now that women have gained access to high office, marriage and love affairs have once again come to the forefront of public attention. But as a rule these private and relational factors are regarded as contingent, rather than essential, to political alliances and strategies, while in Staël's case they are offered as primary causes.

The second reason is the widespread view that Staël's contribution to political theory was on the whole unoriginal, as it was part of an established liberal tradition, and a mere complement

to the doctrines of the men she was closest to, in particular her father, Jacques Necker, and her lover and friend Benjamin Constant. Thus, if she has been granted a (secondary) place in the pantheon of liberal thinkers, this is because she supported and promoted the same principles as her male associates: moderation, representative government, the separation of powers, and the defense of civil liberties against arbitrary rule.²

Clearly gender has been a crucial factor in determining both how Staël experienced politics, and the manner in which her contemporaries and posterity have judged her. Because she was a woman, she could act only by proxy, delegating her political initiatives to some male agent. This dependence she seems to have taken in her stride: if in her writings she denounced the vulnerable position of women in society, she never actually complained, publicly or privately, about being unable to stand for office, and, unlike a few of her contemporaries, she did not advocate women's suffrage. Again, because she was a woman, her political enemies added to the usual personal attacks a great many fanciful sexual allegations. Conscious of that, although she lived as freely as circumstances allowed her, she was always very careful to preserve appearances and to protect herself from scandal (she even avoided divorce, though in postrevolutionary France this had become possible and, to some extent, socially acceptable). Concern for respectability also dictated the destruction of an important part of her private papers, in particular the bulk of the correspondence with Benjamin Constant, though in this case the responsibility rests not with her but with her immediate family.³

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 contribution to that of a somewhat overambitious and hyperactive salon hostess.⁴ The fact that she was a moderate, rather than

a revolutionary militant, has not helped, since she could not be cast in the role of victim or challenger of a male-dominated system, except of course in her opposition to Bonaparte (and there too it has been suggested that her motivation was personal—the emperor’s lack of admiration for herself—rather than political).⁵ On the whole, while gender is obviously relevant to the shaping of Staël’s career and reputation, the way in which she lived her limitations was so peculiar, so deliberately self-fashioned, that it does not lend itself to any stereotyped classification and must therefore be taken on its own terms.⁶

The main purpose of this book, then, is to provide an account of Staël’s approach to politics that brings out the independence and originality of her contribution. Its main focus is the evolution of her views in the years 1789 to 1800, when she had the opportunity to take part (albeit intermittently) in French political life, and to set forth projects and strategies connected with it. It also considers her later assessments of the impact of the Revolution and of its long-term consequences. It is not intended as an exhaustive presentation of Staël’s oeuvre, and touches only marginally on her best-known—and more widely studied—fictional and literary works, though naturally these do also have some political relevance.⁷ Asserting the originality of Staël’s contribution does not mean denying that she was close to or influenced by other thinkers who shared a set of common values; rather, it means recognizing the distinctive mark of her approach to politics, the intimate relation she established between theory and practice, her unwillingness to separate principles from their application.

It has been suggested that the protracted exile into which she was forced during the empire was at the origin of Staël’s major literary achievements, as it provided her with both the opportunity and the incentive to develop her true potential as a writer.⁸ But before this distinguished second life as proscribed romantic novelist and European literary celebrity, Staël lived another existence, marked by frantic activity, great hopes, and confused aspi-

rations, an existence informed by her passionate commitment to politics.

The romantic writer Alphonse de Lamartine may have been exaggerating a little when he claimed, in his *Histoire des Girondins* (History of the Girondins), that Staël had been “breathing politics since the moment she was born.”⁹ It is true, however, that her introduction into the world of politics—apart from her precocious readings of classical authors on the subject—was provided very early on by the progress of her father’s public career. She was only eleven in 1777 when Necker—until then a private banker with some intellectual ambitions—was appointed by Louis XVI to the newly created post of director general of finance; by the time he left this position, four years later, she had learned enough to write him an anonymous letter commenting on and praising his *Compte Rendu au Roy* (Account to the king)¹⁰—the provocative book unveiling the situation of the French state budget that was at the origin of his resignation. When Necker returned to the same ministerial post in 1788, Staël, at twenty-two, was already a married woman with a public status of her own: in 1786 she had become the wife of a Swedish aristocrat, Erik-Magnus de Staël-Holstein, who was granted the post of ambassador to the French court as part of the marriage settlement.¹¹ Yet, in spite of her many social obligations at the Swedish embassy in Paris, she would often linger on in Versailles at the end of the day, hoping for a few minutes of confidential exchange with her father. As well as being influenced by his opinions and writings, she followed very closely the ups and downs of his popularity, the attitudes of the various cabals that gravitated around the court, and the reactions of the general public. The difficult context of Necker’s second ministry, his sudden dismissal and his recall by the king after the events of 14 July, gave her ample opportunity to observe the obstacles and traps that stood in the path of successful government and enduring consensus.¹²

While Staël felt passionately about her father’s reputation, and never ceased to idealize him as a great, if underestimated,

statesman, once the Estates-General had metamorphosed into the Constituent Assembly in the summer of 1789, the focus of her interest began to shift toward this new political environment. Accustomed to the rules of backstage court politics, Necker found it difficult to relate to the new institution he had unwittingly called into being by urging the summoning of the Estates-General and the doubling of the deputies of the Third Estate.¹³ Whatever his views on the merits of parliamentary politics, the actual dynamics of a large representative assembly—with its factions, its popular speakers, its complex allegiances and voting procedures—was still an alien landscape. His inability or unwillingness to agree on a common strategy with some of the moderate leaders of the assembly—an attitude that had disastrous consequences for all concerned—was a clear indication of this unease.

On the other hand, his daughter, once faced with the assembly, found herself fully in her element: from the gallery, where she was admitted as the wife of a diplomat, she followed the debates, transmitted information and instructions, and canvassed on behalf of the different groups of moderate deputies loosely associated with the “patriot party” of reformers. Thus she not only detached herself gradually from Necker’s views—by becoming reconciled to the idea of a less elitist, nonhereditary form of government—but actually developed an independent understanding of the new political forces that were taking shape under her eyes at a surprising speed.

In 1798, when the French army occupied Switzerland, Necker destroyed his daughter’s letters, for fear they might be seized and used against her; other parts of their almost daily correspondence have simply been lost, and the surviving letters tell us more about their domestic affairs than about any political or intellectual issues. There is, however, sufficient evidence to suggest that once Necker retired from politics in 1790, Staël found his company, in the seclusion of the château of Coppet, increasingly

depressing and tedious, especially after Mme Necker's death in 1794. "I adore my father," she once confessed; "it is a cult, but one yawns in church."¹⁴ It was a rather natural evolution in their relationship; however, she repressed it while he was alive by displaying unfailing filial devotion, and after his death in 1804 by taking all possible opportunities to extol his memory.

The three years that elapsed from the summer of 1789 to the beginning of the Terror with the massacres of September 1792 (when she was finally forced to leave Paris for the safety of Switzerland) were probably the most exciting and intense of Staël's entire life, for the radical changes and the new perspectives they seemed to open. At the same time they marked the failure of the revolutionary project in which she had believed so passionately: the establishment in France of a constitutional monarchy modeled on the English example of 1688. It was a debacle from which she never fully recovered, so dramatic was the fall from the high hopes and empowerment of the early months of 1789 into the nightmarish scenario played out in the streets of Paris, where she searched frantically for the bodies of her friends three years later. The unexpected wreckage of a project that, in theory, was bound to succeed, combined with the horrors of persecution and violence, left an indelible mark on her subsequent understanding of the risks and limits of political action.

The mechanisms of power observed from the inside, the difficulty of stabilizing popular favor, and the opacity of public responses were all formative experiences that Staël did not share with the other influential man in her life, the Swiss writer Benjamin Constant. Constant had spent the years of the Revolution pursuing an obscure literary career away from France and its troubles. If he was ready to condemn the Jacobin dictatorship, he had no direct experience of what it had actually meant in practice, nor had he lived through the bitter disappointments of the Revolution's earlier phases.¹⁵ His encounter with Staël in Lausanne in 1794 (their families shared a common Swiss provincial

background) resulted in fifteen years or so of intellectual and political partnership, until they were finally separated by temperamental differences and by stormy emotional conflicts.¹⁶

Together they lived through a second phase of great political hopes and expectations by becoming involved in the directorial republic of 1795–99 and in the consular one established by Bonaparte in 1800, until they were pushed into political opposition and, finally, into exile by the authoritarian character of the new regime. During this period they worked together on the architecture of the modern republic, the form of representative government best suited to the needs of large commercial nations such as postrevolutionary France; they also gave shape to the ideal of modern liberty, the aspiration of individuals to personal happiness and independence in a context where the traditional values of citizenship were increasingly undermined.

While they both contributed to the definition of what we have come to regard as the fundamental principles of modern liberalism, they did so from somewhat different perspectives. Like Staël, Constant believed that representative government was necessary to rule a particular type of society, one characterized (like modern commercial states) by an expanding economy and upward social mobility. Yet his idea of the relation between the two dimensions—socioeconomic circumstances, on the one hand, and political institutions on the other—was rather mechanical: if existing institutions failed to conform to the needs of society, history would eventually take care of them, making them dysfunctional and obsolete. He knew of course that in practice things were not so simple, that historical contexts did not fit neatly into predetermined molds; but he still preferred to concentrate on those issues that political theory was best equipped to address—constitutional models, principles, rules—rather than on the gray areas around them.¹⁷ Significantly his ambitious attempt to venture into the analysis of social beliefs, the monumental *De la religion* (History of religion),¹⁸ was never brought to completion. Staël for her part had seen too many “imperfect” adjustments in

politics—transitions, discontinuities, frictions, exceptions, shortcuts—not to wish to understand what was behind them, even if this implied straying outside the field of political theory into the unexplored territories of mentalities, emotions, and social identities. In this respect the shift from her earlier political writings to the later essays on the history of literature followed a quite logical progression in the adjustment of her intellectual interests.

The difference in the two writers' approaches is best highlighted by their respective analysis of the nebulous sphere of popular consensus, what in the course of the eighteenth century had come to be described as "public opinion."¹⁹ Constant believed that the existence of free public opinion was an essential condition for the success of representative government, but he treated it as an extra-constitutional dimension, upon which politics had ultimately very little control. He expressed concern about its possible evolution—arguing for example that a growing indifference to civic values could make modern societies vulnerable to new forms of despotism; but he did not carry his analysis much further, concentrating on issues such as the responsibility of rulers, and the means of control of the action of government by the citizens.²⁰

Staël, on the other hand, was fascinated by and obsessed with the nature of opinion, a trait that probably represented Necker's most enduring legacy to her. From him she had acquired the belief that at the heart of any viable political regime in the modern world was the interdependence of public credit, trust, and popular consensus. Governments were tested on their capacity to satisfy the interests and expectations of the people; but their ability to do so depended to a large extent on the trust they were able to inspire both in economic and financial actors and in the public at large. At the same time the need to secure public credit compelled governments to act transparently and reliably in the people's best interest. Thus credit and trust were the pivot around which any free and stable government must turn.²¹ It was an approach that placed enormous emphasis on the bond of confi-

dence between rulers and subjects, in ways that transcended the institutional mechanisms of representation.

The elusive nature of this bond, and its mutations in the light of the revolutionary upheavals, constituted the puzzle that Staël relentlessly dismantled in her writings. This involved looking very closely at a wide range of factors: from the evolution of social aspirations and popular sentiments to the fashioning of national cultures, the impact of ideologies, and religious traditions. She also studied the evolution of political language, focusing on the popularization of political discourse, the role of deliberation in representative assemblies, the control and circulation of information, and the use of propaganda. Seen through the opaque filter of opinion, the legitimation by the people of political regimes seemed far more complex than the simple endorsement or rejection of rulers by the popular vote.

Naturally Staël's vision of politics was deeply embedded within the history of the French Revolution and the particular circumstances associated with it. However, this history contained significant, if fragmentary, anticipations of the future that has become our present: phenomena such as the shifting nature of social and national identities, the popularization of culture, the intensified scrutiny of the media, the personalization of politics, the emergence of celebrity as a dimension of leadership—all made their ghostly appearance at the time, in a way very few observers were able to recognize. It is in fact Staël's attention to these "liquid" elements in representative regimes—those factors that cannot be captured or contained within constitutional frameworks—that brings her reflection so close to our own concerns with the evolution of contemporary democracies.